

beneath the stains of time (the feelings disappear) by orphan_account

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Additional Warnings In Author's Note, Alternate Universe - Soulmates, Angst and Romance, Body Horror, Closeted Character, Depression, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Byers Family Stay in Hawkins, Family Issues, Healing, M/M, Mental Health Issues, Mental Instability, Misunderstandings, Past Relationship(s), Period-Typical Homophobia, Red String of Fate, Self-Harm, Slow Burn, Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms, Will Byers Has Powers, a lot of yearning, idk you be the judge, my writing gets better i think, stop making lucas homophobic 2021

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Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Ted Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Joyce Byers & Will Byers, Robin Buckley & Will Byers, Will Byers & Dustin Henderson & Max "Maxine" Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

"All he does is just watch from a distance. That's more than okay with him."

A story about change, healing scars, and alienation.

[Currently On Hold.]

1. Getting Over Him

Author's Note:

Title taken from [Hurt by Nine Inch Nails](#)

This is my first ever multi-chaptered fic in the fandom!! This idea has been brewing for a while now, (since before we got the surprise Hopper was still alive in Russia, hence his absence, and mentioned death) and I'm so excited to get started.

I think this will probably be 70k words and have around 14-16 chapters.

This deals with heavy themes & topics such as self harm/mutilation, depression, suicidal thoughts, etc. So if this isn't your thing, that's totally fine!! Proceed at your own discretion.

Here is the warning for this chapter: homophobic language.

It was another day and Will couldn't care less. He stumbles out of bed to the bathroom.

The bathroom is functional and bare of any frills or unnecessary comforts. It looks exactly the same from when he was little. The entire house looks the same, to be honest. Only now instead of Jonathan's room in the far corner, it's El's, Jonathan having moved out when he promptly turned 18. Boarding at college.

Jonathan told him how progressive New York was, how he was bound to meet someone there, but it was no use he already has a soulmate. Right here in boring Hawkins.

His soulmate couldn't be a worse person. It's Mike, his old best friend,

he hasn't talked to him, *really talked to him*, in two years and he doesn't plan on it. Mike is a piece of shit now, hanging out with the very people who have bullied him for years now. Though Mike is an asshole, it's hard not to swoon over his good looks, as ugly as he is on the inside.

The people at Hawkins High see that too. He's become a bit of a hot shot, having a new girl on his arm almost every week. It makes Will want to throw up when he sees him. He just wants to scream and tell them all he knew Mike first and they're soulmates, but, of course no one would believe him. Leaving him to be a laughing stock for yet another reason. Why does his soulmate have to be Mike *fucking* Wheeler? The most heterosexual person in the goddamn world?

Okay. Maybe that's an exaggeration but still.

Mike's never out right mean to him like the others are. He just lets them kick him around like trash. Even Lucas who never talks to Will anymore, doesn't act *that* way around him.

Ever since he was little he's seen the red strings. His and others. He's '*gifted*.' Called a '*miracle*', a '*seer*.' He's never helped anyone find their soulmates though, as his mother told him long ago it would be dangerous to tell anyone. But of course people knew. Those people being his mother, Jonathan, El, Max and Dustin. He only told his closest friends last year. He probably would have told Lucas and Mike if it wasn't for-

Yeah. He sees his and Mike's strings, they're attached. He saw them the first day he met Mike, on the swings. They're soulmates. And yet, Will doesn't make any effort to do anything about it. If he did, Mike would know and that would be horrible. *Really*. All he does is just watch from a distance. That's more than okay with him.

Why can't his soulmate just be someone like him? Someone actually, well, gay. Someone who isn't a big asshole, someone who was like Mike before-

And there it is. *Him not being able to get over Mike.*

He thinks about it often. Cutting the string. Just taking a scissor and cutting it. And then he'd be fine for good. *No more Mike. No more crazy.* But that's not how it works, he'd probably die if he did that. Mike would too or just get really sick. Even if he wants to cut the string, he can't, he just *can't* do that Mike.

If you rebel against your soulmate it will eventually catch up to you. So, Will doesn't get how Mike can have so many girlfriends without getting sick. It doesn't matter because Will is getting over him.

No matter what.

Will climbs out of the car, shutting the door with a bang, El does the same out the passengers.

They often park a block or two away from school as they don't want the car to get vandalized. Will had inherited it from Jonathan about a year ago, it might be old but Will loves it anyways.

Will drives everyday, to school, to work, to anywhere the (remaining) party members want to go.

"Another amazing day at Hawkins high, am I right?" El says, her tone conveying the fact she doesn't believe that at all. *Not one bit.*

El is target for hateful comments too. People didn't know what she went through and why she's in the special ed class, being not up to 'standard' with what a normal 17 year old is supposed to know. So, they bullied her because if someones different from you, they're automatically horrible! *A freak! A queer! A fag! A lesbo!* And any other offensive names they could possibly think of.

"Ugh, I have english first period. With Mrs. Crenshaw." Will rolls his eyes.

"Take out your books, class! Today we're gonna be reading 10,000 pages of [Romeo and Juliet!](#)" El mocks, in an old lady-New Jersey accent. Will lets out a little laugh. Sounds just like Mrs. Crenshaw. The high pitched squeaky voice that makes you just wanna tear your hair out when you hear it.

Oh, also, Mike's in that class. Making stupid jokes that his friends find funny. They aren't. It was always the same sexist shit that guys like Mike, with fragile masculinity, found to be the most hilarious thing in the world. Mike's so stupid. Stupid, with his wavy black hair that always swishes in the right way, his pink puckered lips that look so soft, his dark brown eyes that you could get lost in.

*Fuck. Will **really** needs to get over him.*

"Whatcha thinking about?" El pushes Will's shoulder, playfully, as they approach the entering to the literal gates of hell, as Will liked to think of it. "You're thinking about *him*, huh?"

How does she know? Even after she lost her powers, most of them anyway, she still has this crazy intuition. Or maybe it's just knowing her brother by now.

"Yeah." Will says unwarily.

They enter school and as soon as they do they see Dustin and Max in the far corner probably arguing over something.

"Will! Just the person I wanted to see." Dustin calls out, walking over to them. Max followed closely behind.

"He only says that because he needs your opinion on something." Max rolls her eyes.

Dustin looks back to her with a hurt expression. "Uh, no, also cause he's my best friend. Anyway.." He turns to Will.

Max comes over to where El is standing, they talk in hushed tones about something, Will can't hear exactly what.

"Max thinks Star Trek is better than Star Wars. Tell her she's wrong."

Both El and Max are both turned back to the conversation. Max looks at Will with an empathetic expression, as to say '*choose my side!*' and

Dustin makes almost the same exact face, it's uncanny.

Will sucks his teeth, pretending to be thinking. Although he already knows his answer. Definitely Star Wars. *I mean, there is no comparison.*

"Sorry, Max but I'm gonna have to go with Star Wars."

And he then sees Mike. Standing all alone, fumbling something into his locker. God he looks good today. Why'd he have to be so hot-

"He's looking at him again." Max points to Mike.

Dustin responds in the same sort of disappointed manner. "Yeah, totally."

"You need to get over him already." Max says and both Dustin and El nod their head in agreeance.

They know Mike is his soulmate. How could he?

"I know but I can't help the fact he's so hot." Will swoons.

"He's alright." Max replies.

"Plenty of hot fish in the sea. Right El?" Dustin asks, winking to El. Of course he's winking to El, she's Mike's ex girlfriend.

"Yup." El nods her head frantically, a grin playing on her lips.

The halls are crowded with people, it's chaotic. There's always the couple that's making out on the left side of the hall, and about ten feet farther down, the so-called 'popular' girls. Opposite them, the jocks and 'popular' guys, and between them, the parade of band geeks with their huge instrument cases. And then there's them, the party.

The halls are dressed in black and white and the tiles are a checker board with humans as the pieces. The whole building sends a chill down Will's spine and reminds him of something out of his nightmares. He does not want to be here, and crosses his arms around his irregularly chilled body; *this is the last place he wants to be.*

The school hallway must have been designed by a manic, either that or someone obsessed with the bland color grey. The teachers have done their bit, hanging posters in primary colours, yet the overall impression is of drabness.

Will is suddenly flown into the prison-hued wall; standing still for too long is never a good idea.

Dustin looks like he wants to do something, as he usually does, being overprotective of Will.

"It's fine, honestly." Will stops him by grabbing his wrist. El and Max, looking ready to do something as well.

"I'll see you guys later. I have to go put my stuff in my locker anyway." He backs away, giving one last look to his friends.

Dustin comes along with Will as his locker is right beneath his. And upon walking up to his locker, he sees the word 'FAG' in dark black marker tattooed onto it.

He sees who did it. Mike's friends, laughing in the corner at him. Mike is with them. Their eyes lock, Mike is wearing an almost sorry expression, not participating in their laughter. But Will couldn't care less as he breaks the gaze turning back to Dustin. Dustin's fists clenched. He looks ready to punch someone in the face for Will.

"No. Dustin!"

He knows it's too late as Dustin marches over to the group of jocks (+ Mike, *who has zero muscle for that shit*).

He hears they're conversation as clear as day. Will just wants to scream and everything would be over. He would be back in his room, huddled underneath blankets, warm and cuddly. That's where he wants to be for the rest of his life; *maybe even die there*.

"Can I talk with you Wheeler? Alone?"

Mike doesn't even get the chance to respond before one of his friends say, "Oh, look, the fags little boyfriend came to protect him." The other two explode into laughter.

And that's when Will has to walk away. He can't take it anymore.

Hesitantly he walks up to Mrs. Chrenshaws homeroom door. This is it, this is where his actions have led him, he slowly opens the door, which lets out a tired old groan as the hinges protest. Laughter sounds along the halls, joined with excited conversations and shouts.

He peeks inside the room, groups of high schoolers sit around the room laughing and causing all kinds of ruckus.

"Alright class. Settle down." The teacher says in her very annoying voice.

Will takes his seat in the back.

"Today we'll be discussing Romeo and Juliet."

Will is lounging in his room, the day already passed. The night falling and the moon rising up in the night sky. He has on his bedroom light, working on a new drawing.

It's one of Mike. He usually draws Mike when he feels especially lonely. Actually, he draws Mike because he misses him and wants to see his face more. He still knows every little detail of his face. Even

how many freckles he has. That's how much time he's spent adoring him over the years.

He sticks his tongue out a bit, trying to work out a way to draw his lips. He kept messing up, erasing, leaving his bed filled with rubber shavings.

Will has gotten pretty good over the years. Drawing and all. It's more than a hobby to him. It's a way of life by now. Something that keeps him going.

"Will!" El calls out, bursting into his room without any warning. He quickly flips to the cover of his sketchbook hoping she didn't see.

"You won't guess who I talked to." She settles down on his bed across from him.

Who? And why is she so excited?

"Lucas." She says, a smile painting her face. "Me and Dustin saw him outside, after school."

And?

"His birthday is this Friday."

Will knows. It's his 18th. *Friday is in just 3 days though.*

"And he invited us to go to his house. Just us. The original party."

If you wanna get technical the original party was him, Mike, Dustin and Lucas. Then realization hits Will like a truck. Lucas invited them, just them. Probably Max too but not him. He didn't invite him.

Will crosses his arms, "He didn't invite me, El."

"No, no. He did. He told me to tell you that you're invited to. Of course Mike's coming too. But it's gonna be great, us all together again!"

No one knew exactly why he and Mike had split apart so suddenly. It was on Will's do not ask list. He got upset every time someone brought it up so the party didn't ask him about it anymore. Max, Dustin and of course El sided with him while Lucas sided with Mike.

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea."

"Oh, come on." She slaps at his knee. "You have to get out more. Maybe talk to your soulmate." El wiggles her eyebrows suggestively.

"Ugh." Will throws his head back. "I don't even wanna talk to him. Let alone be in the same room with him."

"Why?"

She just had to bring it up.

"It's complicated, El." He turns back to her.

"How?"

"It just is."

"But why?"

His voice was getting increasingly louder, "I don't know!"

"Maybe if you tell me I could help you!" She shouted back.

Maybe telling someone after two years would be good. Healing for the soul.

Will loosens his shoulders, relaxing his body.

He tells her all about what happened, she's very clearly shocked and angry at Mike.

"Now promise me you're not gonna do anything to him." After everything Mike did to him, said to him, he still looks out for his well being. After a moment of not responding he calls out her name, "El!"

"Fine," She says, jaw set, "Don't expect me to not hold a grudge."

He thinks she's the best sister he could ever ask for.

Joyce had just come into his room to tell him goodnight and somehow it turned into a full blown conversation and Will telling her he thinks about cutting his string.

"Don't ever do that baby." She tucks a piece of his hair behind his ear. "Don't give up hope." She pulls him into a hug. One that makes him feel like a little kid again not like a 17 year old-almost adult.

He had never told his mother about his falling out with Mike but she knows. She has that motherly instinct.

Will still isn't sure about Lucas's birthday but he is going to listen to his mother. *'Don't give up hope'*. He won't give it up, not just yet.

He can't get over Mike. It just isn't possible.

2. The Talk

Summary for the Chapter:

The old Mike would stand up for Will against those types of guys, not become friends with them. He had to constantly remind himself he knew nothing about 17 year old Mike. This new version of him.

Notes for the Chapter:

warning - mentioned past child abuse.

"Will!" Dustin shouts from down the hall, Will zips his head around, watching Dustin run up to him.

Dustin had actually shed his baby weight, gaining muscles (*with help from Steve*) and became Will's sole protector. Even if he didn't ask for that. Dustin's just trying to be a good friend. He could protect himself just fine, he just didn't like all that confrontation.

It's better to just talk it out rather than punch someone in the face. *Then again he thought about punching almost every stupid person in school on the regular.* Will's self esteem is just *extremely* low.

Dustin swings his arm around Will's shoulders, making practically everyone down the hall stare at them, with disgusted looks.

"Stop it." Will says, trying to take off his arm but Dustin effectively stops him. "They're gonna say things about you."

"Let them." He smiles. "I don't care."

Dustin really is the best at not making him feel like a freak.

"So..." He drags out the word. "Did El tell you about Friday? Are you coming?"

No. Yes. Maybe? Will has no idea yet.

"I don't know, Dust."

"It's gonna be fun! Promise, it's just gonna be us."

"Yeah *but* Mike is gonna be there."

"Yeah..."

Dustin retracts his arm. "I don't get you." He shakes his head, lowering his tone to only a volume Will could hear. "You're so into him but you don't even talk to him anymore. And you act like you don't want to."

"That's because I don't." Will replies, blandly, as if they're discussing the weather.

"I know you don't like talking about it but what even happened? Did you guys like break up or something?"

'Break up.' Really? They were never even together. It was a friend break up not a break up- break up but it hurt all the same. It probably hurt more than a regular break up. Getting 'dumped' by someone you've known since kindergarten. Mike was very clear about where he stood. He's *strictly* straight.

Will scoffs a bit upon hearing Dustin's rather unique word choice. "We were never together."

After their fight, the party quickly learned Mike and Will were the glue that held them together. Without them they just didn't function. So, like how these things usually go, they split apart, even now the remaining party members don't play D&D. Will always refuses. And Dustin and Max always pester him about it. D&D just reminds him too much about Mike. It hurts playing without him. It's like he actually can't physically do it.

"Oh. So the problem was that you wanted to be?"

There's beat of silence as they walk.

"Yeah. I guess. Something like that."

He really doesn't wanna get into it right now.

"Shit we're late."

They run down the hall, and into math. Late. Again. The kids in the class have a running gag about Dustin and Will, and why they're late, almost every day. They just walk slow. To say the least it pisses Will the fuck off. Why can't they just shut up, for once in their goddamn lives? And not terrorize every single person that doesn't have the *exact* type of personality as them?

The type of personality that irks Will to his very core. Will has no idea how Mike can put up with those assholes. *Well, he is one of those assholes now.*

The old Mike would stand up for Will against those types of guys, not become friends with them. He constantly has to remind himself he knows nothing about 17 year old Mike. This new version of him. The new version that has like a million girlfriends every week.

Will knew everything you could possibly know about a person, about Mike. The old Mike. His best friend. He knew his favorite lunch, Peanut butter and turkey (a weird combination but Mike seemed to like it), his favorite shirt, that polo with the blue and white stripes, his favorite book, Frankenstein, his favorite candy, Kit-kat, his favorite band is The Smiths though he'll lie and say Van Halen.

It hurt when Mike cursed him out. When he told Will he couldn't be friends with him anymore. It's been more than two years and Will still can't get over it. He depended on Mike so much. He thought things would stay the same forever but that was a little presumptuous of him. Maybe he's stuck in the past. But there's no way he can't be,

so much shit happened to him. He lost so much time and innocence.

Mike shouldn't have just left like that.

Will stands by the register, leaning on the counter. Eyes glossing over the entire arcade. Rows of machines with colorful pictures on the sides, glowing screens, toggles, controls, buttons, coin slots, ticket slides. Thin patterned dark blue carpet, neon lighting that isn't turned off even during in the day time, the arcade looks exactly the same as it did when he was younger.

The entire place smells of cherry coke and hair spray. A smell that Will has gotten used to over the years.

It brings about nostalgia. Will remembers coming with the entire party, *the original party*. The feeling of slippery cold coins in his sweaty palm, slipping them into the slot, jabbing at buttons, slamming his hand against the side of the machine in frustration, grabbing a drink for a quick slurp before the next level kicked in. And of course this place is associated with the mindflayer, as well. Not all happy memories.

But now having someone to help him through his panic attacks is great. Robin is great. He had actually gotten the job through her, and she was recently promoted to manager, only having Will under her thumb. It's also nice having a gay friend. Someone who gets his struggles.

The place is like a ghost town now, no one comes in there anymore. Only the occasional friend group and one offs. It means less work for

both Robin and Will so it kinda worked out, even if it wasn't the most exciting place to work at.

"Hey, have you heard from Steve? The dingus didn't answer any of my many phone calls." Robin asks, huffing a bit after she finishes her sentence, he knows she's upset about Steve not answering.

He sees her pushing a hair out of her face, wearing a less than happy expression.

Steve actually now worked next door, at the video store. Coming over very frequently to hang out with both Robin and Will. Calling Will '*one of his favorite children*'. Dustin, of course, is in front of Will. Max, and El tied, a close third.

If he didn't pick up the phone it meant he's probably studying for some test. In the last year he finally got his shit together and applied to Purdue. The only college he could get into with his less than stellar high school transcription.

Will had come to learn Steve actually isn't that dumb, and is cool. He had evolved over the years, shedding his '*King Steve*' popular guy phase. Something Will hopes Mike would do. He heard about everything he did for them when he was lost *and* possessed. Saving his brother and Nancy, leading the demo dogs away from the tunnels, taking care of the kids.

He understood why they all were so attached to him. He's like they're collective older brother, even if Will already has the best big brother. Steve picked up on Mike's behavior as he began to hang out with them less, he and Robin know about the split. Not the exact reason but they know. As Will knows that Jonathan, Nancy, his mom, and

probably the moms of the others know.

It was strange being inseparable and then splitting apart all the sudden. But it did happen, as strange as it was.

"I haven't, I saw him last like two days ago, he's probably studying for some final at his apartment."

And to this Robin rolls her eyes. If she's upset over not seeing her best friend from two days ago, imagine two years. *Two fucking train-wreck years.*

"He's so annoying sometimes." She drags out the 'so' for maximum effect. "How hard is it to answer a phone?"

Will knows she's not looking for an answer so he simply gives her a sympathetic shrug, turning to face the other side of the wall. Cleaning up a few coke bottles, and chocolate wrappers that Robin had forgotten to throw out.

He hears the doorbell chime, *finally a customer*. It's been slow all day. He hears the footsteps of this person, echoing sharply around the deserted arcade.

Then he hears Robin and he knows he's fucked. "Hello, *mini-* Wheeler, what are you doing here?" She says in her oddly calm voice. One that can either soothe or frighten you.

Will wishes he can be like Robin, brave, a badass. Sometimes he even wishes he can be like Max, someone who doesn't take anyone's shit. But he can't, for some reason it just doesn't work, he's stuck being himself.

He's stuck being Will.

He spins around and sees Mike standing right by the counter. He's wearing a blackish grey shirt that reads '*frankie says relax*', with black (very tight) jeans on and combat boots that look almost identical to Will's. His wild curly hair, dropped around his pale cheekbones.

He looks like your average rock star. *Funny* because he always had the worst music taste, at least when Will knew him.

And Frankie says relax? The two lead singers of Frankie goes to Hollywood are openly gay. It's a well known fact. The music video, Relax, was so gay it was literally banned. Will saw it though. Mike probably did too. So, Mike wearing that shirt makes Will's blood boil. He doesn't know what type of game he's playing or why he's even here.

Mike adopted Will's style in the last year or so, Will had long ago bid farewell to the striped shirts and the plaid button ups, opting for Jonathan's mostly black, hand me down oversized shirts which had their favorite bands and artists on them. He usually tucked them into his loosely fit jeans. He got rid of his bowl cut almost 3 years ago, talking on a haircut that sort of mirrored Jonathan's old one. A slick swipe of gel to keep it in place. The last touches? The paint plastered on his jeans, his combat boots and silver rings.

Mike's eyes widen. "Will?"

Why the hell is he here?

"Mike?"

Robin is eyeing the two, the same expression she had earlier still playing on her lips, but she looks like she resents Mike. And Will has to wonder why. Does *she know- No, that isn't possible. Is it?* His friends are just super protective of him. He still absolutely hates being treated like a baby.

"You work here?"

"Yeah. Have been for a while now." Will brushes his hand through his hair, trying his best not to freak out from being face to face with Mike.

And during that movement he sees the red string pull Mike's wrist closer to him. He curses whatever god there is, *this really isn't funny.*

"Of course you wouldn't know that." Robin snaps. Will sends her a '*stop it!*' expression. She shrugs her shoulders, basically meaning '*what? It's true.*' and that he can't argue with. It is true. As sad as it is.

Mike looks uncomfortable as he turns down to the patterned carpet. Will has to ease the tense situation, *it's getting awkward.*

"So what are you doing here? I'm guessing you're not here to play Dig Dug, right?"

This gets a smile out of him. And Will thinks he's never seen anything better. Mike's smile is contagious.

"I'm never playing that game again, Max rocked my ass off."

Will grins. "Just the price of being a shitty player."

It oddly feels like time never passed. Like things are back to normal. Regular. But Will knows that's not what this is. His smile quickly fades and so does Mike's, remembering all that happened between them.

Mike touches the back of his neck with his finger tips, something Will knows is a nervous tick, Mike's had it ever since they were little. Guess he didn't outgrow it. Mike never had it around him though, but things change. They always do.

Will keeps repeating the phrase in his head, *'don't get stuck in the past, don't get stuck in the past, don't get-'*

"Dustin actually told me to meet him here." Mike cuts through Will's internal monologue.

Why the hell would he tell Mike to meet him here? Of all places?

Wait. Holy fuck-

"Why would he tell you to meet him here?"

The door swings open and there he is everybody. Dustin Henderson! The world's worst plan executor! If he wanted him and Mike to talk, Will would have to break it to him that it didn't go as stellar as he had hoped. It didn't end in them confessing their true feelings or whatever the hell Dustin wanted. It just started and ended in an awkward manner.

"Wheeler! Byers! Robin!" He throws his arms up, smiling, like he's so *fucking* happy to see all of them.

Robin now has an amused expression on her face, watching Dustin as he walks up to the counter right next to Mike. "This was you're doing huh?" She motions between Will and Mike.

Will internally slaps his hand to his face. Why'd she have to say it like that? It just makes it sound weird.

Dustin nods, still smiling. Both Will and Mike's expressions fall flat, sharing very irritated looks with one another. Will's planning on talking Dustin's ear off about this. "Anyway, can we use the back room?"

"Why do you need the back room?" Robin asks, her eyebrow quirked, to their secrecy. Will knows Robin all too well by now. He knows what her facial expressions mean. And this is, *do you have any secrets to hide?*

"We just need the back room."

"You can't talk out here?"

"Rob," Will says, looking at her. Then turns and faces Dustin and Mike. "Let them use the back room."

"Fine. You have ten minutes, children! Ten minutes and then that's it."

A flush of *'thank you's'* come from Dustin and Mike, passing both Robin and Will on their way to the back.

It's been more than ten minutes at this point. They've been in there for 20 by now. Will keeps on wandering back to what they're talking about but then quickly stops himself, they're allowed to have private conversations. But he doesn't get why Dustin chose to talk to Mike *here*. They could have talked literally anywhere else. It's clear, Dustin wanted them to talk to each other.

He really hopes Dustin's not talking about him. Or the soulmate

thing. Although Will knows Dustin's a good enough friend to not bring that up.

"Hey! I said ten minutes!" Robin yells outside the door, turning back to Will smiling. She walks back up to him with a slow stride. "What do you think they're talking about?"

Will shrugs, his arm extended on the counter, cupping his cheek. "I have no idea," he sighs.

"Wheeler copied you, you know." She pokes at his shoulder.

"Well if you wanna get technical I copied you and my brother. I took basically all his old clothes and this," He holds out his hands, showing her his rings. Then he points to his tucked in shirt. "All you." They smile at each other.

"Did you see his shirt?"

Will nods, he sure as hell did.

"I mean "*Relax*", you've seen that video, right?"

Yup.

"Literally super gay." Will responds.

Robin raises her eyebrows, "You think he's..."

"No." Will replies in a split second. "He's a prick, Rob."

It's her that sighs this time, "I thought me and Steve taught you kids better."

Mike oddly reminds him of Steve. How he was back then. When he was playing *'popular'* guy.

"He's like Steve. Like reverse Steve."

She quirks her eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Steve used to be an asshole right? But then he became better over the years, he stopped trying to chase popularity and what other people wanted. Mike's like that but reverse."

"Probably scared of what would happen if he accepted himself."

"He's ***not*** gay."

"Mmhm." She says in an unconvincing tone. Robin doesn't believe it for a second.

"What does '*mmhm*' mean?" He mimics her tone.

She shrugs her shoulders, walking over to the vending machine in the corner of the arcade. Out of her pocket she takes a couple quarters, drops them in the slot, presses 'B-9', Skittles.

Robin strolls over with a smug expression, jiggling the Skittles. She tries extra hard for Will to see the phrase on the wrapper. '*Taste the Rainbow*'.

She's clever, Will gives her that. He grins as she pours the small chewy candies into his extended hand. "I bet you \$20 he is."

"Deal. It's on, Buckley."

The door swings open, a very rushed Mike walking out, Dustin following. "Bye, Will." He says, already on the other side of the counter.

"Bye, Mike."

And in a second he's gone. The boy who Will is literally in love with, even if he doesn't want to admit it.

What the hell did they talk about?

Will looks at Dustin, "What did you say to him?"

He smirks. "Nothing much."

"Dustin!"

Will looks into the trees. Except for a few shreds of moonlight, the woods are as dark as a shut closet. He has no idea why he decided to go for a walk at one in the morning. A walk in the woods. Maybe to visit the remains of Castle Byers, moping.

Will shivers and presses the cold cigarette to his chapped lips, hugging the paper weapon as he clicks the lighter to life and lights it. Eyes contaminated by loss and pain as they slid shut while he inhales the precious chemicals like they are his life support. The sweet toxins fill his lungs and he exhales his relief in a cloud of grey smoke. It swirls upwards, devouring everything in a cloud of smoke, in its delicately deadly path before curling into nothingness once again. The pale substance is a ribbon of death, and he gazed, transfixed at its thin folds as they ebbed away, dragging his health with them.

It's a coping mechanism, it's his mother's too. Maybe that's where he got it from. After the whole Starcourt incident, he started smoking. All the shit he went through was just too much for him. The trauma. The loss. The legal age was 16, and being only two years under that wasn't that big of a deal. He got his cigs from a pharmacy at the edge of town. It was sort of sketchy, not asking for an id, but they gave him his supply so he was fine with it. Then last year, they raised the

age to 18, and yet he *still* found a way.

He takes a deep drag and exhales the smoke into the air, watching it disappear into the night sky.

Will approaches (the remains of) Castle Byers, a figure sitting down on a log. It strikes a little fear in his heart. He can't see who it is, or, what it is. *What if it's the demogorgon? Coming back for him? Coming to kill him, coming to-*

Then he sees the figure, it's Mike. *Why the fuck is he here? Why is he everywhere all the sudden?*

"Mike?" He takes another huff from his cigarette, exhaling.

"Will?"

He walks over to where Mike is sitting, plopping himself right next to him on the log. Will extends his fingers, offering Mike a huff from the cigarette, which he takes rather quickly.

"You ever think about changing things?"

After a second, Will responds, he lets out a dry laugh, "All the time."

Mike passes the cigarette back to Will. "When did you start?"

"Like 3 years ago, after that summer." He smiles, pushing Mike's shoulder slightly. "What, you don't smoke?"

"It depends... How many do you go through a day?"

"What? Packs?"

Mike nods.

"One, I think, depends on the day, right?"

"You're gonna kill yourself."

"*Maybe.*"

Will takes another huff, looking out into the trees, watching them creek in the gentle breeze. It's oddly relaxing. "You come here a lot?"

"I come here sometimes to think, I don't know." He touches the back of his neck.

Why is he nervous? Will knows he's doing it without even looking at him.

"Stop it."

"What?"

"I know when you get them." He motions with his cigarette. "You don't have to be nervous around me."

"You know when I get them?"

"I've never said anything but yeah of course I know. Just like you know the bruises I used to have didn't come from "slamming" into the wall."

"Yeah. I'm sorry about *him* by the way. He was an asshole."

Will laughs, dryly. He isn't actually laughing. He doesn't find it funny in the slightest. "Yeah, of the like highest order. I'm kinda glad he left, even if it made our family even weirder."

"How?"

"I don't know... it just did. People seemed to think Lonnie was great,

but he was just a drunk that beat his kids. My mom, I can't blame her but I always wonder what she saw in him. When they first met. I can't imagine him being anything other than what he was."

"Same with my parents, they hate each other. I don't get why they won't just get a divorce or something. My dad, he thinks going to church is gonna solve things. I don't know, like praying, but I can't change who I am, you know?"

He can't be talking about-

"I get it."

A few seconds passed, a blanket of silence covering them, and passing the cig between them.

"Do you ever get sick? I mean from rebelling?"

Will already knew what Mike was talking about, rebelling from his soulmate. Rebelling from the very person sitting right next to him.

"Yeah, all the time... You?"

"I get sick like every week, I try and hide it though."

Why does he hide it?

"Who was your first?"

Why did Mike just ask that-

"Oh, uh, his name was Emmett, he was cute, not really my type though."

"What was wrong with him?"

"Nothing, he just had blonde hair and blue eyes."

"So what's your type?"

Why was he asking so many goddamn questions-

Their eyes are locked and Will just says it without thinking, "Dark hair and eyes, *black hair*, freckles, and tall. Like kinda freakishly tall."

Mike breaks eye contact first. "Pretty specific type there, Byers."

Fuck. Will's too relaxed for this shit right now. He takes another huff, stubbing out the rest on the part of the log beside him.

"Kind of small.." Mike pauses, thinking. "Not really, just small compared to me, birthmarks everywhere, light brown hair, hazel greenish eyes."

Holy fuck, Mike just described him. Will's gonna ignore that right now out of sheer embarrassment.

He grins, mocking how Mike sounded just seconds earlier. "Pretty specific type there, Wheeler, but I'm pretty sure half the girls you've dated aren't," Will puts up air quotes. "Your type."

He digs into the pocket of his leather jacket, for the pack of marlboros. Will feels the jingling of his keys echo across the silent woods. He opens the pack, taking one out before Mike stops him by putting his hand on his.

"I'm serious you're gonna kill yourself."

Will pulls away first, *why does he care?* "So?"

"*You're gonna kill yourself.*" Mike enunciates.

He rolls his eyes, reluctantly putting the pack of marlboros back into his pocket.

And there's a minute of somewhat comfortable silence.

Mike speaks first. "You think you could forgive your soulmate if they made a mistake?"

"I probably would in a second... But the whole thing's kinda bullshit anyway. '*Soulmates*?' I don't know, it's weird."

"I don't know, I think it's romantic. It makes me feel better sometimes knowing there's someone out there that really gets me, like *gets* me."

Hah! Will thinks this whole conversation is ironic. They are soulmates.

"Hey, I have to get back now but, uh, we can finish this talk some other time?" Mike gets up, brushing his hair with his hand. He looks very frantic, to say the least.

"Yeah. Yeah, sure. How about next week, one a.m? Sounds good?" Will jokes, holding back a grin, and Mike returns the expression.

"Definitely, but I might be seeing you tomorrow, you know, for Lucas's birthday. You're coming right?"

"I don't know. I might."

Mike groans. "It's gonna be fun. Fine, come for me then, please."

Will could never argue with Mike when he said please. He still can't.

"Alright, I'll be there."

3. The Birthday

Summary for the Chapter:

There's a minute where all Will can take in is Mike. It's like the rest of the world has faded away. El, standing near him. The sound of his mom clambering around the kitchen. The honking of cars trying to get to the main streets. All he can hear is Mike laughing. It makes him truly happy. Even if that happiness lasts mere seconds. Will could record Mike's laughter and play it on a mix for the rest of his life and he'd never get tired of it.

But that'd be weird right?...Yeah, totally.

or:

Will goes to the Wheeler's place for Lucas's eighteenth birthday. Chaos Insues.

Notes for the Chapter:

warnings - mentioned suicide attempt. suicidal thoughts/idealization. panic attacks. homophobic language. mentioned recreational drug usage.

Location: Byers's place, Hawkins, Indiana

Time: 4:38

Date: October 23rd, 1988

Sometimes it's easy to find your soulmate. You'd just see the string right away when looking at them. That wasn't the case ninety percent of the time. You had to admit something to yourself and then and

only *then* you could possibly find them. All you have to do is follow the string. If you wanted true love you followed the string, wherever it took you, until you found them. If you're a 'seer' like Will is, you'd see everyone's string, not just yours. If you were like most people, you didn't see yours until you found your soulmate.

It isn't uncommon for people to get sick from rebelling, it's more uncommon to find two people who aren't soulmates settling down together. Like Karen and Ted. Like Joyce and Lonnie. Will knew that Lonnie used to tell his mother he saw their strings connected, but she never did, she saw it falling to the floor not pulling onto him. Will saw what she saw too.

After a while, you get used to rebelling, you get used to the sickness, it doesn't bother you anymore. Will didn't want that, he didn't want to become accustomed to the pain of not being with his soulmate. But he already felt it, when he was in the upside down he felt it, when Mike was with El he felt it, when Mike threw him away like a piece of rotten Halloween candy he felt it. He feels it every time Mike is with someone else. He feels it when he's with someone else.

Some people never meet their soulmates. Sometimes one of the pair dies, leaving the other feeling empty and hollow without their other half. His mother had found her soulmate, Bob. Will saw their strings attached the second he met him, and Will knew they both knew.

It happens weirdly like that sometimes, his mom knew Bob in high school and they didn't see their strings. They got together twenty years later, and then Bob died. Leaving Joyce feeling empty and hollow, her string was gone. It disappeared from her wrist the very second Bob was attacked by those demo dogs that extra chilly November evening. Will felt guilty. He had caused the death of his mother's soulmate. Her *one*. He surely didn't deserve his.

Will turns back to the mirror in front of him, taking in his look. He put together a very simple outfit, a white Ziggy Stardust shirt underneath his leather jacket, tucked into his black jeans. A belt he had '*borrowed*' from Robin, which he had no intention of giving back, gracing the loops. He wears his signature silver rings and for this *special* occasion, the necklace that El had bought him a few years back for his birthday. A forest green tear shaped amulet hanging from a black string. She told him she thought it brought out the green in his eyes. He did his hair as he usually did, maybe even applying an extra amount of gel, to keep it in place. It *totally* isn't because he wanted to impress Mike.

Will doesn't, he really doesn't. Mike can go fuck himself. He takes a further moment to wonder why he cares about what he looks like to Mike. Surely it doesn't matter at this point, does it? Not after everything that had happened. Mike didn't look at him and see Will. He sees ghosts, the way Will does when he looks at Mike. Mike sees the sick kid Hopper and Joyce brought back from the Upside Down, or the kid that was strapped to a chair in the shed, or the one being constantly bullied by grade A assholes. Mike sees pain and regret. Not Will.

What was that conversation even about yesterday night? Why was he acting so casual about Will being next to him? Will thought Mike hated him, why did tell him to come to Lucas's birthday for him? *For him*. Why did he phrase it like that?

He can hear 'Open Arms' blasting from El's room, and he sings along to the lyrics quietly. Will grabs his doc's from the corner of the room, plopping himself down on his bed and pulling them over his black socks. Will remembered when Jonathan had come home for fifteenth birthday, gifting him a pair of brand new Doc Martens.

They were expensive, Will knows that, and Jonathan somehow still got them for him. They had endured much over these past two years, but they still aren't worn out. Will makes sure to take care of them. He misses Jonathan. More than he lets on. He has El now, and Steve sort of filling that brotherly position but it isn't the same. When is he coming back again? Around Christmas? New Years? The last time

Will saw him was for their mother's birthday and that was in August.

God, has it really been that long?

He shifts his focus to what had happened last night. He still doesn't understand it. Will doesn't understand Mike. He's just *not* understandable.

Next to him is Lucas's gift, wrapped neatly in some leftover wrapping paper Will had found from last Christmas. He really didn't know what to get him, so he went homemade. He just drew a picture of Lucas, *current* Lucas, adding in his camo bandana (*from old times*) and in big letters he wrote 'BADASS'. Will can't deny that fact. It didn't take him very long, he was done with it in about two and a half hours, one hour dedicated to outlining, one to drawing Lucas's actual features, *perfectly*, and thirty minutes to coloring it in.

The song stops abruptly, leaving a weird silence in the house for a minute before he hears footsteps coming closer to his room. He looks up to see El standing in his doorway, leaning on the door frame. She has her hair slicked back in a ponytail, a green hair tie pulling it back. One Will knows she had gotten from Max. Light shimmery purple eye makeup on, it reminded him of her look at the snowball. She's wearing a light beige sweater over her short white and blue flowered dress. Will thinks his sister looks beautiful. "Lucas said to be there by 5, are you ready?"

He grabs Lucas's wrapped gift from his bed. "Yeah, yeah. Lets go."

She turns around, walking down the hallway, Will following her. They turn to their mother, by the phone, who is speaking into it. "I'll give the phone to Will right now."

He looks over to El who gives him a little noncommittal shrug. Joyce

mouths 'Mike' to him, handing him the phone, and remembering something she had to do, walking to the kitchen. *Why is he calling him?* They're literally about to see each other. He scoops it up, putting the receiver to his ear, "Hello?"

"Hey, Will." In the background, he hears someone scream something to Mike. A voice Will recognizes as Lucas's. Even if the timbre of his voice is now much more deep.

"Hi, Mike."

"Wait a second." He tells Will. Mike must have clasped the receiver in his hands, trying to cover up what he's saying but Will can still hear it all *very* clearly. "I'm telling him right now!" Mike yells, and Will thinks he sounds just like a whiny fourteen year old again.

He smiles into the phone, waiting for Mike to speak again. He can practically visualize Mike's face right now, he's probably scrunching up his eyebrows, making his annoyed face, throwing his hands up in exasperation, leaning on the wall in the basement for support. "Hey, sorry, Lucas is being really annoying." Will can hear Mike's groan over the phone.

"You probably shouldn't be calling the birthday boy annoying, Wheeler." Will jokes.

Mike laughs over the phone. "Aha, Byers, *very* funny. I can't help the fact the guy is now eighteen, six foot two and still acts like a thirteen year old."

Mike acts like a *baby* . It slips out of Will's mouth accidentally. "You act like a child." He stifles his laughter.

Mike giggles, "You wound me, Byers."

There's a minute where all Will can take in is Mike. It's like the rest of the world has faded away. El, standing near him. The sound of his mom clambering around the kitchen. The honking of cars trying to get to the main streets. All he can hear is Mike laughing. It makes him truly *happy* . Even if that happiness lasts mere seconds. Will could record Mike's laughter and play it on a mix for the rest of his life and he'd never get tired of it.

But that'd be weird right?... Yeah, totally.

"So..." Mike says, bringing Will back from his internal monologue, he drags out the 'so' awkwardly, "Change of plans, we're having his thing at my house now."

Things are back to how they really are.

"Ok, we'll be there soon."

He can hear the static coming from the phone as they both have yet to say bye. "Bye." And Will hears the line click, putting the phone back on the wall, he turns to El. "It's at Mike's now."

El nods her head slightly, taking in the information. They both walk into the kitchen, hovering around the counter, waiting for their mother to turn around from her current position facing the cabinets.

She finally does. "You're heading out now right?" Joyce asks, looking between the two of them warily. Will knows what she's thinking right now. Just by that look. She's already picking up on the whole 'Mike' situation.

El looks from him to their mom, "Yeah." She stuffs her hands in her blouse pockets.

Joyce smiles, putting her hands on her hips, "Why don't you tell Mike to come over after? I'm making my *famous* pasta puttanesca for dinner."

Will contemplates arguing the matter but decides against it, he'll just tell his mom he asked Mike to dinner and he said no. *Simple. Easy. No hassle. No worries.* Though something is probably bound to happen anyway. "Ok mom. Dinner sounds good." He smiles back at her.

Will is a survivor. People have constantly called him that, his mom, Hopper, El, Max. He's pretty sure he'd even heard it from Jennifer Hayes at some point. Sometimes he doesn't feel like he's surviving, only barely living. Every passing day is like a new stab of pain, an open wound that will never heal.

Either he locks himself away from the world and just disappears, letting this stuff destroy him, or today, he's gonna try to stay positive. Paint him yellow and call him fucking sunshine. He's just gonna give less of a shit and try to not be bothered. No matter who says what or what happens.

The plan (*almost*) goes to shit when Karen Wheeler opens the front door. She smiles at them but he could see the slight grimace she made at him the second before.

"Jane!" Karen says, flinging herself at El for a hug, before she could even stop her. El told him she felt sad every time she heard her real name. Her *mom* had given her that name. It felt wrong hearing other people say it. And yet everyone (*other than close friends and family*) calls her that. El had actually asked Karen to stop calling her that a few years back- with little success. He imagines El's irritated face right now.

When they pull apart Mrs.Wheeler begins to speak again, disregarding Will entirely. "Michael has been talking about you all week. I know he misses you."

....*Okay?*

Will fights the urge to roll his eyes. That would be "*disrespectful.*"

"Why did you two breakup again? You were so nice together. Made my Michael-"

Before she can finish her sentence, Will can see Mike coming from behind her, "Mom!"

He has on the same punk look as Will, the only difference, he's wearing heavy black eyeliner.

EYELINER. Even Will isn't that bold-

In a second he's standing next to her by the door frame, looking right at Will. At *him*. Will can't stop the heat he feels rising in his cheeks, tinting them a light shade of pink.

Mike turns to his mom. "That's not even true. I wasn't talking about her." Then he looks at El with an apologetic expression. 'Sorry', he mouths.

"What did I tell you about that?" Karen puts her hands on her hips, her face twisting into disgust and annoyance.

Will really wants to leave right now. He even considers it for a moment before El squeezes his hand. She smiles at him sadly, but in her expression all Will can see is assurance. The phrase, "*stay positive*" rings in his head like a song. One he *really* isn't fond of.

"About what?" Mike asks, not understanding why his mother was acting this way. Especially in front of Will and El.

"The eye makeup? It makes you look like a-

"Mom!" Mike cuts her off, fearing what she is going to say. "We're just gonna go to the basement. We don't need anything." He changes the topic, motioning for them to come inside.

Will knows what she was gonna say. *Stay positive*. He's trying his best to not blow off his lid right there and then.

He steps inside, into the foyer, following Mike to the basement, he finally registers the fact that he hasn't been here in over two years. The place where he and Mike would have constant sleepovers, hangouts, campaigns. He hasn't been inside the Wheeler home for over *two* years. Mike hasn't been to *his* house in over two years.

"I'm sorry about her."

Is he really apologizing right now?

"It's fine," Will mutters under his breath.

It isn't.

As they're almost by the basement, Will looks up to the stairs. The carpet stairs that lead up to their bedrooms.

Is Nancy here? He wants to talk to her. Even if it's just for a few minutes. She always listened to him.

"Is Nancy home?" He asks, and Mike stops at the entrance of the basement. El, closer to Will than she is to Mike. He can hear Dustin and Lucas talking about something downstairs. He wonders if Max is still coming. *Is she even here?*

"Yeah, she's up in her room. You wanna talk to her?" Mike quirks his eyebrow.

Will nods, so slightly, he's not even sure if Mike sees it. But he does. "You can go up. Do you remember where it is?"

"Yeah."

"Kay." Mike responds, walking down a few steps, El, taking Lucas's gift from Will's hand, following him, giving Will one last '*aahh! I'm*

entering the belly of the beast.' look.

How did things ever get so complicated?

Will turns, walking up the stairs, each step, a memory.

1976

"Hey! No fair you can't just run ahead like that!" Will shouted out. Mike pushing past him, running up the steps, zooming into his bedroom. "It's fair!" Will heard him say as he shut the door with a bang. He smiled, trudging up the rest of the steps to get to Mike's room. Will opens the door, slowly, as to not alert Mike. He bursts into the room, attacking Mike on his bed, tickling him. Mike's laughter fills the air, Will thinks he's never heard anything sweeter.

1977

Mike sniffled as Will set the bandaid on his cheek. He was still furious about what had happened. Did those bullies have to be so rough? It reminded him of his dad when he got drunk. Will hovered over Mike who was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, he tilted his head, placing a kiss on the bandaid. Mike's sad expression turns into a smile, brushing over the place where Will just kissed.

"What was that for?" Mike asked, sweetly.

Will responds right away, "My mommy does it for me when I get hurt, it makes it feel better," He smiles back at Mike.

Mike's smile fades away in a second, "What does a 'fairy' mean? Like an actual fairy?"

Will doesn't really know, he just knows that his dad uses that word. It's not good, whatever it is. "It means something bad."

"Well, I'd rather be a fairy than a poopy head."

Will giggles, "Mike!"

"That's what they are."

1979

Will leaned on Mike's door frame, studying the boy's face as he examined Will's drawing. It was his rainbow ship. The one he made especially for Mike. The one his mom was so proud of him for. "I love it." Mike held it to his chest, opening his arms to pull Will into a hug.

"You do?" Will says over his shoulder.

"Of course. I'm gonna put it up on my wall and everything."

Will smiles, brightly.

1983

"It was seven." Will says, already positioned on his bike.

Mike whips his head around, staring at Will like he's grown a third head, "Huh?"

"The roll...the demogorgon, it got me."

1984

"If we go crazy we'll go crazy together right?"

Will smiles back at Mike, a glassy tear forming in his eye, "Yeah.. Crazy together."

1985

"It's not my fault you don't like girls!" Mike yelled, effectively crushing Will's heart. If only he knew. He was speechless, all he could do was climb onto his bike, riding off into the rain. It is Mike's fault. Will wished he yelled that at him.

1986

Mike clambers around the room, searching for the drawing. The rainbow ship. He doesn't know that Will took it. He had made this entire scavenger hunt for it, he wanted to do something special for Mike's birthday. His 15th birthday. It was in four days. "Have you seen the ship? Wait -" He looks at Will, suspicious. "Did you take it?"

"No." Will grins, "I wouldn't know anything about that."

Mike stops short, walking towards Will with a slow stride. He's not smiling, rather - his eyes look full of desire. He wraps his arms around Will's waist, his eyes flicking down to his lips.

And holy shit, this is happening.

Before either of them can speak, Mike presses his lips against Will's, connecting them. Will cards his hands through his unruly curly black hair, his body pressed between Mike and the wall.

Mike backs up from him, eyes widening, he brushes his hair back in place, awkwardly. His lips are pink and puckered from kissing, but his entire face was blank, Will couldn't read it. He looks empty. Will took the giddy look of his face, frowning.

Is something wrong?

Mike didn't look at him again, he just picked at his sweater, "I think you should leave." He said, robotically, in a tone that doesn't sound anything like him.

"...Okay."

He was confused. Mike kissed him. Maybe it would have been different if Will kissed him first, but no, Mike kissed him. Will stumbled out of Mike's room, with one last 'are you okay?' glance at him. Mike didn't respond, he just stared blankly.

Mike didn't see their strings. He couldn't have. That couldn't be his reaction, could it? It didn't seem like he saw them. Why was the universe so fixated on hurting Will?

It wasn't until the next day, in school, when Will pulled Mike aside did he talk to him.

"Hey, are," Will started, his voice soft. "Are we okay? I thought maybe you were mad at me, or something...? And you kinda won't even look at me today so maybe you are." Will swallows thickly. "Are you mad at me?"

"Leave me alone."

Will didn't understand. "What?"

"I don't think it's a good idea for us to hang out anymore."

"Wh-why?"

"Because I don't want to be friends with you."

He was going to be sick.

"What?"

"I don't wanna be friends with a faggot!" Mike's voice echoed off the school halls, stinging him. "Stay the fuck away from me. I don't wanna catch AIDS."

There was a harsh sob that was stifled, and at first Will wasn't sure which one of them it had come from. It must have been him. He turned around, shocked to his very core. Mike Wheeler, his best friend, his one, just -

This was real. This was reality. Painstaking, excruciating reality.

He ran down the hall, into the bathroom, shutting close a stall. Will slipped down onto the floor, his chest shuddering as he cried into his palms.

Will shakes his head to stop all the thoughts racing inside. He knocks on Nancy's door, awaiting a response. "Go away Dustin, I already talked to you!" She shouts.

"It's not Dustin. It's Will."

"Come in!"

He opens the door, seeing Nancy standing over by her dresser, picking out a couple of different shirts. She's wearing *just* a bra, with black jeans. Will doesn't mind too much, Nancy is practically his sister. And she treats him like her younger brother, always has. She holds out both t-shirts interchanging them on her chest, "Which one is better?" She asks, looking at Will.

The first one is a collared light baby blue shirt, one that reminds him much of how she used to dress a few years ago. The other is bright pink, with black polka dots, it suits her much better. It goes with her skin tone. "The pink one."

"Really? I feel like the blue one is more work appropriate."

"You have a job interview? When did you even come back?"

Why didn't she come by?

Nancy and Jonathan both went their different ways to college, Jonathan to New York and Nancy to Chicago, vowing to keep a long distance relationship, and a year later it crumbled. Jonathan had found his soulmate. The best they were able to do was stay close friends, though Will can feel the deeply concealed resentment Nancy harbors, though she would never openly admit it.

"I just came for the weekend. It's not a job interview, I'm writing a paper about the decrease in small businesses and how capitalist America is taking over. Doing some interviews on local businesses and.. it's this extra credit project," She trifles through her drawer. "And my professor..." Nancy sighs, "Is like the biggest asshole ever so 'Nancy Drew' has to prove him wrong." She finally looks at him. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

She puts the pink shirt over her head, fixing it on her, and yup, Will was right, it does compliment her skin tone. "My brother." Nancy rolls her eyes.

Will doesn't even wanna get started on him. "It's fine." He shrugs, "At least I'm here now right?"

She steps forward, wrapping her arms around him in a hug, "I missed you, you know. Chicago is boring."

"I missed you too." Then he adds on. "Hawkins is boring."

"It sure is." They break apart, Nancy now looking at him with a smile on her face, "Have you figured out where you wanna go yet?"

She's talking about college. Will honestly has no idea, he just knows he wants to get into a school that has a good arts program. Maybe Columbia? It would work because Jonathan's in New York. He'd be closer to him, but then he'd be farther from Nancy, Steve, Robin, Max (*who has decided on California State*), Dustin, and basically everyone he cares about. Besides, his mom would have a massive freakout being away from her "*baby*" for too long.

"You don't have to know right now," It's like she's reading his mind. "You have time." Nancy assures him.

"I feel like time is running out sometimes." He dry laughs, but what he's saying is the truth. He actually feels like that.

"Maybe it is," She pokes at his chest, playfully. "Because you need to get downstairs. They're waiting for you."

"Yeah." He says, solemnly, not wanting this conversation to end.

"We can talk tomorrow. I'll come by, we can go to that diner you like for breakfast, El can come with us too if she wants. How does that sound?"

It sounds amazing. Will nods frantically. "Alright. Get down there!" Nancy says, and he turns exiting her doorframe. Time to face the wrath of his friends. Well, friends *and* old friends.

Stay positive.

He's at the top of the basement stairs, breathing in deeply, he can already see everyone sitting around the table. Max is there, she must have come in the last few minutes, laughing about something. Lucas and Dustin are on each side of her, smiling. El turns her head, eyeing him, Mike following her train of gaze. And soon everyone is looking at him, silent. He smiles softly, and a bit awkwardly as he comes down the last of the steps.

"Hey guys," Will turns to Lucas, "Happy birthday."

"Thanks man." Lucas replies, "Who are you and what have you done to Will?"

"What do you mean?"

"The leather jacket."

He snorts. "I stole it from my mom."

El positions her arm over the chair, smiling at Will, "From one badass to another."

"Bitchin' ", Will responds.

"Ok you *disgustingly* cute siblings, we have a game to play." Max breaks their moment, intertwining her fingers.

"Cool," Will sits down in the only seat available, the one in between Mike and El. *Great*. He gets to sit down next to Mike. It's almost like they did this on purpose. "What are we playing?"

"What are we playing-" Dustin starts, confused as to why Will's asking, "D&D. Did you not see the board?"

For the first time, Will looks at the table, they set up the board and everything. "I-"

El stops him, "You're playing." She orders.

"You guys can play without me."

"We can't. We need our cleric." Max says.

"Who are we gonna seek absolution from, guidance? We sure as hell can't get it from a Ranger." Dustin looks at Lucas, who sticks his tongue out at him.

They're all such babies, they can play without him. Can't they?

"You planned a campaign." Will says to Mike, it's not a question, it's a statement. A realization on his part. He thought '*cool guys*' didn't play such '*nerdy*' games.

Mike nods, "It's my gift, *but* it doesn't work if you don't play."

"I'm sure you can figure it out." Will snaps back, crossing his arms.

Everyone groans, a mumble of '*come on*' and '*please*'s go around. "Come on dude. It's my birthday, don't be *that* guy." Lucas leans back in his chair.

"Who knows the next time we'll all be together again? And you *never* wanna play anymore." Max adds.

"That's not true!" Will says, defensively.

"Really?" Dustin deadpans, his face falling flat, "When's the last time we played? I honestly can't remember."

In about five minutes Will agrees (*reluctantly*). *Guess the party still needs him.* They've now been playing for about two hours. Will wonders just how long this campaign is.

"Out of the corner of your eye you see two panthers dart towards you from behind the throne. They are obscured and warped by the mage's magic," Mike looks at El, and then back at everyone, "You raise your shield in anticipation of their inevitable pounce, but it never comes. You feel the spiked tentacles impale your unprotected back as the displacer beast bears down on you," He focuses his gaze on Max, "Zoomer, your action?"

She puts her head back, thinking, "Move action to cut off the beast before he moves to the door in the chamber and on the way I use a Free Action to knock the flask of oil off the table, potentially causing him to slip. By positioning myself between the undead army and the door, I ensure that if he were to pass me I would get an opportunity to attack by using his reaction. Which is...," She takes the dice, passing it back to Mike. "Displacement."

He rolls the dice, wishing for a 10, the only roll that can effectively take out the displacer beast. "Shit." Mike puts it on the table, everyone now sees he rolled an 8.

Everyone groans, Dustin sighing loudly. "We were so close." Lucas says, already giving up.

"The Shield Master feat," Will provides, "Which together with proficiency in Athletics, will allow me to knock down the displacer,

prone with my bonus action – giving us the advantage on our attack rolls against him."

Mike nods, already knowing the next step. "By casting thunderous smite, then making my first attack doing extra 2d6 thunder damage, if our target failed their saving throw and was knocked prone, then I would make my second attack with advantage and use my Greater Weapon Master feat to take the -5 to hit penalty and do +10 damage. If the displacer is still standing after this I could use divine smite or even my action surge to finish them off."

Half an hour later they're all sprawled out on the floor, talking about god knows what. Will isn't even paying much attention. He's just staring at Mike. "Can I smoke?" Will asks, looking at Mike.

"Yeah." Mike replies, shrugging. "My parents aren't home anyway."

"Thanks."

Will takes out a cigarette, and his lighter, lighting it in one swift motion. He takes a huff from it, exhaling off to the side. Lucas is eyeing him, in disbelief. "You smoke?"

"Yeah," Will smiles, joking around, "Don't you wanna be cool like me?"

El's face falls flat faster than a loaf of bread falling in an oven. "Don't glorify nicotine addictions."

"Oh god." He mutters under his breath, then looks at her, "Nicotine addictions run in the family. Only Jonathan, doesn't *just* smoke nicotine."

"He's a stoner?" Mike asks.

"You're telling me you've honestly never seen him and Nancy?"

Will caught them once, smoking a joint on the porch. The price of his silence was sharing.

"I don't really pay attention to her."

"You should, Maybe she'll take you with us when we go for shooting practice."

"You guys do that? What do you even shoot?"

"Oh you know, the usual. Humans." He deadpans. And then after a few seconds and multiple huffs from his cigarette, Will adds on, "Cans."

"Nancy's the best." El says, smiling.

Everyone agrees, except for Mike, of course. Dustin clarifying what

he meant, "Steve's the best."

Max grins. "We get it you're like in love with him or whatever."

They all burst into fits of laughter.

Max suggests it. Truth or Dare. Something they all know she gets *way* too much enjoyment out of. "Oh come on. You guys are so boring." The pitter patter of the rain coming from outside, hitting the basement window, she turns, smirking, and then back at Mike. "Truth or dare?"

"Fine," He thinks for a second. "Dare."

Her grin turns even larger, she's plotting something. "I dare you to climb the tree in your backyard."

"It's raining."

Thanks for that, Captain obvious, Will thinks.

"Wear a raincoat." She says back. "We can watch from the window."

In the next several minutes, multiple things happen, they all watch Mike go out into the dark, almost slip off the tree in the pouring rain, and when he comes back he's wearing a less than happy expression, his eyeliner is smudged, his bottom lip jutting out into the swirl of icy raindrops. His hair, soaked and the curls coiling all over his dark green raincoat. Dustin is dared to put his foot in the toilet, Lucas had

to reveal the weirdest thing he's ever done, which was surprisingly underwhelming, Will had to talk in an british accent and El had to put as many snacks as she could in her mouth at one time.

They're all hovering over the kitchen counter, the tossed candy wrappers, El consumed, covering the entirety of it. *It oddly feels like old times.*

"Max," Dustin says, from across the counter, "Your turn. Truth or dare?"

"Truth." She responds in an instant.

"Tell us your *deepest darkest* secret."

El giggles."Fun."

Max sighs, cupping her cheek with her arm now extended on the counter, "I'm bisexual."

It's the way she says it so casually that catches Will's attention. "Really?"

"What does that mean? Are you like dying or something?" Lucas furrows his brow.

Mike answers for her, talking very nonchalantly, "It means she likes

both."

"Both of what?"

"Guys and... girls."

"I'm pretty sure that's not a real thing."

"It is, cause I'm that thing." Max says back, then she turns to Mike.

Will knows when she's faking a smile, she had mastered it, right down to look in her eyes. He sees it in her eyes, and holds on to her as the facade crumbles into a real grimace. "Do you have a problem with that, Mike?"

Holy shit, El must have told her.

He briefly wondered if she was lying about being a bisexual but knows Max isn't like that. She wouldn't lie. *Friends don't lie.*

"I don't care." Mike shrugs.

Stay positive.

Will laughs bitterly. "That's funny coming from you. You don't care? You don't care?" Will is fuming. "That is such bullshit! You're bullshit! You sure 'cared'," He puts up air quotes, mocking him. "A hell of a lot two years ago."

"People change!"

Really? That's his response? He hasn't changed one bit, if anything he's gotten worse. "You told me you couldn't hang out with a faggot," Mike flinches at the slur, "Isn't that what you said? Tell me, Mike, it's pretty simple, did you say it or did you not?"

Mike mumbles, "I said it."

"*What?*"

"I said it but I tried to apologize, you ran away!"

"It's been two years, Mike. You tried to apologize? You did a pretty shitty job. Do you know what it's like to lose your best friend over this shit? The person you care about, probably the *most* leave you? It's clear I didn't mean shit to you. Yeah, you might be the same person but you are *nothing* like how you used to be. You turned into this huge egotistical dick! That's the thing about you, you don't care about anyone except yourself anymore. And it's not just me who sees it now. I didn't tell anyone about what you said to me. Two years I shut up about it. But, you're an asshole. And I don't get it!"

The lights above them flicker, the surge of electricity dimming quickly into an audible hum. Any and all commotion has come to an immediate halt. Five pairs of eyes, trained solely on him, all of them surprised by his behavior. Will didn't yell. He was quiet. Nice. Capable of doing no wrong. Max is frozen but still looking at Will with concern. El scowls at Mike, crossing her arms, remaining close to Will's side, Dustin and Lucas both huddled next to Max, their faces

twisting in an utterly surprised expression.

Will needs to get it under control.

Will's cheeks flush red, and his expression read of pure distress. He's frantic and entering borderline hysterics as he says, his voice raised. "I thought I could just come here and we could have a normal time, *for once* , but this proved I can't be in same *fucking* room with you and not explode! And I swear to god, the next time you try to talk to me, I will lose my shit! I honestly never wanna see you again. Don't fucking talk to me."

This isn't right. This isn't how friends treat each other. They fought, sometimes, sure, but this is utter chaos. Will looks, in that moment, like he hates Mike. With all his being.

Something inside of him knows he could never truly hate Mike Wheeler. Even in betrayal the mechanism to turn it into hatred fails, instead Will's mind seeks to understand his behaviour from a compassionate point of view.

He needs to get out of here right now. He can already feel the tears forming in his eyes. He doesn't wanna give Mike the satisfaction. He *can't* see Will cry.

He does his best to collect himself, looking at Lucas, and talking in a voice that he knows sounds like he's on the verge of tears, "Sorry. Happy 18th, really."

He pushes past Mike, running out the door. Five voices cry out, "Will!"

But he ignores them. The static in his head is deafening.

The panic starts with a tightening of his chest, as if the muscles are trying not to let another breath in, but instead to die. Then the breath comes, shallow, lungs unable to move much against the suddenly heavy ribs. Then Will's mind becomes static, thoughts making no sense, replays of horrors once forgotten. He sinks to the wet ground, hugging his knees to his shaking chest, digging his nails into the flesh of his arms, unable to fight off tears.

"Fuck!" Will shouts out onto the empty road. His remaining thread of strength frays before breaking completely, sending him plummeting over the edge and into the darkness. Hysterical sobs shake his thin frame, threatening to tear him apart from the inside.

Late october rain on Will's skin, enough to chill what was once warm inside. At any other time he would have called a friend, asked for the warmth he needed to ward it off, just a little is enough. No longer. Now he just lets it come, drop by drop, feeling like it is an ocean falling upon him instead of rain - the grief of years he tried so hard to carefully suspend has all condensed right above his head into water droplets. They say it can't rain forever, that there will come a time when it must cease, that the last drop will have fallen. The thing is, Will just doesn't care. He plans to just stay here in the cold, comfortably numb. He can't escape it no matter how hard he tries, it follows him around like a black shadow.

His mind plummets downward into less and less light, and darkness beyond measure. Is there a bottom to the mind's pain? Is there any branch of hope, or something to catch or hold onto? Is there some rescuing idea that can come into the thoughts? Why is he so fucking untouchable? Why can't it end? How much darkness can one take without any light? Will doesn't know. He doesn't have any answers.

The weight of everything seems to press down on his shoulders. It's too much. All of it. And somehow, he keeps moving. All this time. But every step costs him. The darkness grows darker; the pain grows sharper; all of it seems to only grow in strength and he begins to wonder if things could ever get better. But Will never said a word. Sometimes he wonders if that smile- the horribly fake smile- is ever seen through. If someone ever notices that sad, broken look in his eyes that he sees in the mirror, everyday.

It's ghostly white skin tainted by charcoal circles under sad eyes, and purple burn marks viciously parading on his chest. It's the inability to even get out of bed. It's giving up on himself. It's bursts of anger and late night tears. It's the feeling of disgust within himself that makes him want to tear off his own skin just so he can finally feel clean. It's uncertainty and confusion. It's losing tons of weight, long showers and greasy hair. It's constantly wishing you could be somewhere or someone else. It's losing the strength to even live.

During the times of his panic attacks, all of the various thoughts racing through his head were racing so blindingly fast, it was impossible to even comprehend them, or slow them down. It's like watching a movie play out in extreme fast forward and looping it over and over.

There are other times when his mind went completely blank, or, the various areas of his brain weren't cooperating. It would take him twenty minutes just to lift the bedcovers and move one leg out onto the floor. He'd walk into the kitchen to make breakfast and find himself just standing there, in the middle of the kitchen doing nothing.. just staring.

There are wild mood swings. Will would be fine one second and the next curled up into a ball crying. Screaming. Unable to breathe. Max and Dustin had seen it. El had seen it. Both Jonathan and his mom had seen it. He'd just get up in the middle of a conversation and walk out because he hit a wall, no longer able to deal with all the sensory input he was getting.

All he really wanted to do was sleep (and, well, kill himself).

The more he denies the hurt, the stronger and more insistent it becomes. It's settled into this deep, wicked ache in the very back-bottom of his stomach. He can feel the emptiness flowing through his veins - it's like it's growing, so fast it wants to rip his body apart. He feels hollow and full of sadness all at once, and he can't remember ever being happy. The kind of sadness that makes him unable to think about the future. The kind of sadness that makes him feel like he's alone, even when he's surrounded by friends or family.

He's not sure what's rain and what's his tears anymore. It's all the same. Will's not sure when this will stop. Maybe it'll stop when the rain does. That's just wishful thinking. He knows he's gonna carry this his whole life. It's not just Mike. It's everything combined into one. The abuse. The bullying. The demogorgon. The upside down. The mindflayer. The possession. The pills. The heartbreak. The lights. The darkness growing in Will's heart. The lost innocence and time.

Will sank lower and lower until he forced himself beneath the water, hands splayed tensely on the sides of the tub, holding himself down, emptying out his lungs. Which one of them would find him? Dead. By his own doing. There was a second of absolute suspension before his body spasmodically inhaled water and he reflexively sat up. He climbed out of the tub, collapsing on the floor, shaking, throat raw and thoughts pounding as loud as his pulse.

He knows he can't stay here forever. He wishes he could. He wishes he could die here. On Mirkwood, where the events all first started. The light of the lamppost in front of him flickering as fast as his thoughts. Will looks up, arms still hugging his knees, eyes widening.

What the actual fuck is happening to him?

He can't deal with this right now. Not another thing.

Water washes over his skin so strongly that it feels as if he's in the flow of a river rather than a rain shower. And so the only thing to do is to get up and get away from it all. The cold icy rain pierces his pale and wet skin. Will runs across the slippery path, his posture weakened by the weight of his soaked clothes and shoes. The quality of darkness shifts in the sky but the rain keeps on pouring.

So he runs to the only place, and person, he thought of who would ask no questions. The knock comes quietly at first and then there is silence for a second before he opens the door. Tight blue jeans tucked into a blood red shirt. Will flings himself at him, disregarding his soaked clothes, wrapping his arms around him in a hug, letting it all out.

"Rob, you might wanna come over here." Steve says.

4. Disconnected

Summary for the Chapter:

And so as the quietness grows deeper, Will steadies his rhythm. Sitting at the kitchen table, picking at the oily pasta Steve made for him. The table is wood and round, leaving him on one side, with Robin & Steve on the other, looking at him diligently. They're like concerned parents that ask you to come and "talk" with them about grades or homework or whatever. You just know by the look on their faces it's not good.

"What happened?" Robin finally asks, cutting through the silence.

Will sets down the fork with a clink on his plate. "I don't really wanna talk about it."

Notes for the Chapter:

warnings - self harm/mutilation. blood/gore. suicidal thoughts/idealization. anxiety and paranoia. panic attacks. homophobic language.

The front door slams shut, a pair of black docs running out of it. Everyone's silent for a minute, taking in all that just happened.

"Great going, dickhead!" Max exclaims, crossing her arms, scowling at Mike.

Everyone is staring at him, like he's this big asshole. Even Lucas.

Maybe I am, Mike thinks.

He knows he fucked up this time. He fucked up last time too. He's

just one *huge* screw up.

"How the fuck could you say that to him?" Dustin asks, but Mike knows he's not searching for an answer. His face is the split image of *'I'm about to punch someone'*, and that person is Mike. Max urges him to stop, putting her hand in front of Dustin's chest. It doesn't stop him for long. He gets to Mike in a second. Lucas, Max and El are still frozen in the positions they were in when Will initially left. "You don't deserve him."

What the hell does that mean?

"What?"

Dustin repeats it, voice getting louder. "You. Don't. Deserve. Him."

"Fuck you, Dustin," He spits. And in a second, Dustin pushes him down, he stumbles, falling to the ground. Dustin hovering over him, fist cocked, ready to pounce.

"Enough!" El yells, right when the fist was going to hammer down on him. She looks like she wants to run for Will or beat the living daylight out of Mike, either would do. She looks at Dustin, jabbing a finger at him, "I understand why you're angry. I sure as hell am too, I would love nothing more than to beat the crap out of Mike but that's not gonna solve anything."

She pushes Dustin aside, extending an arm for Mike to take. He grabs onto it, El helping him get off of the floor. But he knows that wasn't a peace agreement as she glares at him before turning back to the rest of the group. She places both of her hands on the counter, leaning on it for support. "We need to go after Will."

Everyone nods. Everyone *except* Mike.

Mike follows her train of gaze to both Max and Dustin, "You know how he gets when he's bad."

Lucas quirks his eyebrow, "Bad?"

"He has these episodes... he can't snap out of-"

Mike interrupts her, eyes widening in fear. "Episodes? Like upside down episodes?"

Max smiles superficially. "Oh, look who wants to give a shit now!"

He returns the expression, mocking her.

"That week, when you guys had your fight," El looks at Mike, saddened, "Will couldn't do anything. He couldn't get out of bed. He was messed up about it." She points to her head. It oddly reminds him of how she didn't know how to speak much when they first met.

Did it really affect Will that much?

"I'm sorry Lucas but this is more important." El says.

Lucas nods his head, "I agree." Then he looks at Mike. "You drew first blood, apologize or you're kicked out of the party."

Mike opens his mouth to talk but nothing comes out, it's like he can't speak any longer. He's prohibited to.

"Party rules." Dustin finishes, adding a grimace to his face when he makes eye contact with Mike.

He gets it. He's a piece of shit.

In the next fifteen minutes, they all get suited up, ready to look for Will. Mike argues with El over her just wearing a dress and how she *has* to wear pants because it's raining. *An argument that wasted a good amount of time that could have been spent on Will.* It ends in her slamming the upstairs bathroom door, coming out with a less than happy expression over wearing Mike's old sweatpants. Max gives El her jacket, and she takes Mike's oversized light blue bomber (*very* reluctantly). Scowling at him the *entire* time. Dustin and Lucas wait by the door, talking about something in hushed tones as Mike gets his big chunky black boots on.

It's official, all his friends hate him.

He looks over to the clock on the wall, 9:17. And with one deep breath in he approaches them. Five sets of eyes all on him.

Max is the first one to speak, "Why are you even coming? Will's not gonna wanna talk to you... or even look at you."

He pushes past her, huffing. He says, under his breath, "Shut up." And opens the door, stepping out into the darkness of the front lawn. The rain was already hitting his raincoat hood. Taking a deep breath of cold, crisp, autumn air.

Max looks at him, as everyone shuffles out, her blue eyes now as red as her fiery hair. "What was that, Wheeler?"

"What was that, *Maxine*?" He mocks her, taking in the same tone.

Mike turns his back to her, *and everyone else*, starting to walk in the direction of the street, alone. The rest of the party trailing behind, not wanting to talk to him.

He gets why they're mad at him. He's mad at himself.

He can hear them talking, muffled between the sound of his boots scuffing up underneath the wet ground and the pouring rain. Max is saying something about wanting to hit him, while Lucas keeps talking about how he had no idea *that's* what happened that caused the split.

El's quiet but something in him knows she's staring at him. Her eyes fixed on the back of his head.

He can feel it when she spies.

Dustin is probably fuming, fists clenched, trying his best to not beat Mike up at this very moment. He's showing restraint, which Mike recognizes as... something.

El takes the lead, running down the street. She runs a full block before she stops at the corner. The rest of them, trying to catch up with her. Now they can all see what she's looking at. A car. Their car. Will didn't take it. Which means that he couldn't have gotten far in the last twenty minutes. Not by foot.

They all share very concerned glances. And for the first time since this all started they don't look at him with pure hatred in their eyes. Just worry.

El looks into the car window and then back at them, "He wouldn't go home. It's too far."

"Okay, well, we can look for him better if we take the car. It'll be faster." Lucas suggests.

"It's *his* car. He has the keys."

"Where would he go?" Dustin asks, shoving his wet hands into his jacket pockets.

There's a moment of silence and thinking they share, out in the rain. "I don't know." Max says. "He could be anywhere."

Mike has an idea forming in his brain. He ignores the rest of their comments and walks ahead. Will would go somewhere he finds comfort in, somewhere where he feels safe. That isn't anywhere here, but it's close. Walking distance. Fifteen minutes at most.

“Mike!” Five voices call out in unison. He turns around, annoyed, shoving the sleeves of his raincoat over his wrists.

“Where are you going?” Lucas shouts. Everyone is looking at him like he’s a crazy person, not understanding.

Mike shouts back. “I know where Will is!”

“Where?” They all shout.

“Just follow me!” Then he mutters under his breath, “Jesus.”

*How is he the **only** one that knows where Will would go?*

They all run ahead, catching up to him. “So.. where is he?” Max asks, walking side by side with Mike.

“Steve’s.” He responds, definitively.

“How do you know that?”

“One, he didn't take his car. Two, he didn't go home because no one's there. Three, he always used to go to Jonathan,”

Or him.

“For this stuff, and since he can't, who's the closest person to him?”

Dustin and El finish the thought, “Steve.”

El knocks on the door of Steve's apartment. 1C. He rents out of a house, having the main floor all to himself. Hopefully Will is here. Hopefully Mike's right.

Steve opens the door, looking at them speechless, “Who is it?” Mike hears someone scream. A voice he recognizes as Robin's.

He turns his head slightly to the hallway, shouting back, “The kids!”

“Is Will here?” El asks.

“They wanna know if Will's here...” Steve pauses, “What do you want me to tell them?”

He's talking to Will. Mike feels a wave of relief wash over him.

A few seconds of silence before Will responds. “Go AWAY!”

“Let me talk to him.” El says, and Steve stiffens at the door. “Please, let me talk to my brother.”

He leans on the door, “I would let you but you heard him.”

Mike watches as El grows more irritated, eyes fixed, eyebrow raised, then redirects his focus back to Steve, “Is he okay?”

He scoffs, crossing his arms, “Why would you care?”

Will told him.

“He told you?” Mike’s eyes widen.

“Why wouldn’t he? He’s my friend and I *care* about him. I’m not the one that called him a *disgusting* slur.”

“ *Really* ? Because I remember Nancy saying something about what you said to Jonathan a few years ago.”

Somehow they’ve grown much closer, *so* close they’re coming face to face.

"Back the fuck away from me."

Mike feels the tension in the air and hears the intensity in his tone. There's a great deal of emotion behind these words he is speaking. All he can do is try to make a new and hopefully better choice and see what unfolds. *This doesn't happen.* Though he understands how Steve came to feel this way. And things do go different, not all magical and fairytale-esque, there's pain that Mike inflicted. *On Will.*

In that frozen second between standoff and fighting Mike's eyes flick from Steve to Will, walking towards them hurriedly in the hallway. Their faces are unreadable, no fear, no invitational smirk. He can't help but notice the flickering of the lights coming from the hallway.

What is wrong with them? Is there some sort of neighborhood electrical problem?

It subsides as Will shouts, "Stop it!" at them, and they break apart. Steve, *still* grimacing at him.

Will looks at him, standing right by the door frame next to Steve, wearing different clothes now. Loose black pants with a white and gray long sleeve shirt that hung off of him, going down slightly past his waist. "Just go home, Mike. Stop pretending like you actually care about me."

It's like being trapped alone in the darkest abyss with a sword pierced through his heart. This broken heart is silent, it can't be seen but the blood bleeds inside. Just hearing that out of Will makes him want to cry. So instead he backs up, jaw clenched to hold the tears about to boil over. He can feel his stomach drop and the blood drain from his face. The world seems to stop, the only sound being his breathing, the rain, and the hammering of his heart in his chest.

He watches as Will turns to everyone else, "I'm fine guys, really. Thanks for coming to check on me but I'm good." Then he speaks to

El, "I'm gonna stay at Steve's tonight. Please tell mom when she gets home."

"Sure," She smiles sadly.

"You're the best. Love you." He says to her.

"Love you too. Feel better."

"Thanks."

Everyone shouts a *'feel better'* as Steve closes the door, saying one last, *'goodnight, I'll see you little shit heads soon. Oh! And happy birthday, Lucas.'*

Mike feels like he's barely functioning as everyone starts to walk down the road, taking one last look at him, Max speaks first, "And everytime I think you can't possibly get worse..."

"Seriously, stay away from Will." El says to him, "I don't know what happened to you. You're not the person that took me in all those years ago."

Both Max and El turn away, Max throwing her arm over her shoulder. He can hear their conversation as they walk, "Wanna come to my house tonight? I'm gonna be alone until mom gets home."

“Sleepover?” He assumes Max is smiling.

All Dustin does is flip him off. Lucas pats his shoulder saying, “What you did was shitty.”

'Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid.' Mike thinks as he walks down empty Mirkwood road. He rocks back and forth, mumbling at himself. He tugs at his wet curls, raincoat hood down, his heart rate spiked. The crisp rain still falling down, piercing his pale skin. Mike's eyeliner flushing down his face, leaving black streaks all over.

He's scrambling to get home, checking back to see if he's being followed. He can't shake that feeling. Maybe it's just paranoia. Moonlight reflects in the puddles, leaves scrunch under foot. A shadow appears. *Silence.* Mike stops, circling round, hearing for the slightest movement. The sound of breaking twigs echo in his head.

Then it hits him. This is fear in his mind, controlling him. Using him.

His mom thinks he's *'crazy', 'loopy', insane'*. She's been giving Mike these pills to calm him down. It sounds amusing from the outside, sure, but not when you're in your own head, not able to do anything. Imagine the worst nightmare you've ever had. Take a moment to recall it. Then imagine you were unable to wake up from it because you're already awake. That's what he feels all the time.

Why can't it end already? Death can't possibly be worse than what he's experiencing now.

Mike knows he shouldn't be feeling this. He should be fine like the others are. Nothing even happened to him, he was just a witness. A witness to the treacherous horrors. With every step he takes he feels like he's reliving it, seeing Will's body at the quarry, watching El die at the hands of the demogorgon, the mindflayer, Will's possession, watching Bob die, watching Billy die, watching everything happen and doing nothing. He was supposed to be a leader. Instead he failed everyone, sitting around doing nothing when the people he cared about were in danger. When the people he cared about were suffering. He shut his friends out. He hated Max from the beginning just because he thought Will had a crush on her. He continued to date and hurt El knowing full well-

He tried his best to comfort El after Hopper died and it failed. Mike tried his best to comfort Max after Billy died and it failed. He even tried to comfort Joyce after Bob died and it failed. He doesn't even wanna get started on how he failed time and time again with Will.

I don't deserve to live, Mike thinks.

His brain is like an extinguished fire. Once it burned bright, knew of happiness, he could see a future. Now Mike's mind is dark, subsisting on the burnt tinder of who he was. In these ashes there is nothing to even renew a spark. Like Will said, he's nothing like he used to be.

It's like the world has collapsed, leaving Mike torn apart. The flame has been burnt through everything he believed in. Like it demolished all that's true. It's been a long time that he's been sitting around and dissolving, drowning in his own tears. It's like a nightmare that never ends, chasing, screaming, till he's dead. Like Mike's beaten and bruised with scars that'll never heal. Like it'll be raining forever with every tear he's cried. Like joy is lost. Like the safety of his everything has been crushed to its demise. Like he doesn't know anything real. Like he's drowning in a pool of lies.

Lies he created. Lies that hurt.

He turns the key into the doorway, opening it to the house. And when he enters it feels the same as coming home after a long absence. Mike knows this isn't home. Home is a place where you're accepted. Loved. This isn't it. His only true '*home*' is was with Will.

"Hey dad." Mike says, absentmindedly, floating in the space between the doorway and the stairs. His dad laid back in his recliner, watching who knows what. Mike doesn't bother getting any closer, he's dripping wet anyways.

His father doesn't even look him in eye. "Where were you? It's almost eleven o'clock."

He looks at the clock on the wall, 10:38.

"I was just out," Mike rubs the back of his neck, thinking of a lie to create. "I went for a run."

Ted looks at him, skeptical. "In the rain?"

"Yeah, I-"

His dad stops him, "Your mother told me Will came over."

Mike's heart rate accelerates, *nothing even happened. Well, other than*

him being cursed out and going on a wild goose chase to see if Will was alright.

"Everyone came over. It's Lucas's birthday," He reasons.

"Remember our deal." Ted's face turns strict.

The fear spikes in his heart, adrenaline floods his system, his heart pumps and beats like it's trying to escape. His body wants to run to the safety of anywhere but here. But where will he go? Everyone he cares about hates him now. Mike remains where he is. He needs to face it, there is really only one thing he can do: pray his dad isn't gonna go through on his deal.

His adrenaline surges so fast he almost vomits, all Mike can taste is saliva thickening in his throat. At some point he'll have to move, and he'll have to live with what he gets.

January 12th, 1986

His dad's eyes narrowed, "I will not allow you to become like him."

He was talking about Will.

"Like what?" Mike spat back.

"One of them homosexuals." Mike opened his mouth to retort but his dad was already talking again, "I won't allow you to be further influenced by his disease-ridden ways, you need to grow up into a man not a faggot."

Mike tensed, this was not happening right now.

"Yeah." He scoffs, "I'm gay dad. What are you gonna do about it?" Mike watched as his dad's face contorted into disgust.

The pure revulsion in his dad's voice sent chills down his spine, he consciously took a step back from the sharp glare and clenched fists, "You will not fall into homosexual tendencies, Michael. If I see you with Will one more time or hear that you're hanging around him," Ted stops for a moment, "I won't hesitate to get you help."

All he could hear in his dad's words were his rants recapitulating homophobic "scientific" pamphlets. The facilities to "help" them. His dad was grouping him with the people he hated, the people he ranted about every morning and truly believed deserved to die from AIDS. His own dad now saw him as worthy to die and that...that truth seared Mike's heart until his chest burned with the pain of held back tears that he knew he couldn't spill without making his father believe even more that he was one of them.

Mike felt queasy and suddenly lightheaded. He couldn't get his eyes to focus on his dad as everything went blurry, "I hate you."

"You'll see in time I'm just doing what's best for you." Ted pats his shoulder, lips firmly pressed together.

Mike watched as his dad disappeared around the corner and down the stairs.

How could he tell Will about this?

Will would think it was his fault and it wasn't. Nothing was ever his fault. He could already feel the stinging pressure tears brought against the back of his eyes, flowing down his pale cheeks. He made one mistake. One kiss his dad just happened to see. And it cost him everything.

Mike did his best to avoid him the next day. He couldn't tell him. He couldn't. Will's his best friend. Always and forever. At least he thought so.

Will pulled him aside, noticing his off behavior, "Hey, are, are we okay? I thought maybe you were mad at me, or something...? And you kinda won't even look at me today so maybe you are. Are you mad at me?"

*This was the time. He **can't** go to conversion therapy.*

Mike swallows hard, "Leave me alone."

Will furrows his brow, "What?"

"I don't think it's a good idea for us to hang out anymore."

"Wh-Why?" Will's voice breaks.

Mike was going to be sick.

"Because I don't want to be friends with you."

He felt like throwing up.

"What?"

"I don't wanna be friends with a faggot!" Mike's voice echoed off the school halls. "Stay the fuck away from me. I don't wanna catch AIDS."

Please forgive me, Mike thinks.

Mike watched as Will turned, running down the hall. He clenched his jaw, trying his best to hold back tears. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' running through his head.

He just said that to his best friend. His soulmate. His one. He just -

"Son?" And Mike's brought back to the conversation, "You should go to bed. It's late."

He nods his head, "Night, dad." Mike says, hollowly.

Mike walks up the stairs of their house, heading into the bathroom.

He closes the door with a thud, taking in his reflection in the mirror. He looks like a ghost. The world turns into a blur, and so did all the sounds. The taste. The smell. Everything was just gone. He pauses for a second, trying to hold back the strange feelings rumbling inside but couldn't. A lone tear traces down his cheek, and just like that, the floodgates opened. So many tears burst forth like water from a dam, spilling down his pale face.

His breathing becomes heavy. To the point where he's gasping for air that simply isn't there. Mike's throat burns, forming a silent scream. There's too much raw pain inside of him to be contained. He hurt Will. He doesn't deserve him, Dustin is right. He cries like his spirit needs to break loose from his skin, desperate to release an elemental rage on the world. A rage on himself.

Why did he submit so easily? He fucked up everything. Everything he had.

His broken heart was still and for a moment, he only felt numbness. And then anger and sadness surged through him with so much power, he didn't know what to do. Mike's mind goes completely blank.

At first there was silence. A misty haze upon the horizons of his mind. That's where he kept everything, in his mind. Closed off to the rest of the world. Before Mike knew it there were hysterical babbles, his own, yet they seemed so distant. Tears streak his face. Time had fast forward. He couldn't remember the briefest of moments, all he sees is the sharp cuts deep on his forearm. Three cuts in total. He watches as drops parade down the sink in a shallow of red. Then he sees the razor sitting on the counter.

Did he do this to himself?

All color drains from Mike's face, he's as white as a slice of bread. Clammy, a cold sweat perspiring from his forehead, his entire body is shaking like crazy. Edging backwards. Heart in his throat. Too out of it to even comprehend. Incapacitated with fear.

The thoughts are accelerating inside his head. He wants them to slow so he can breathe but they won't. His heart is hammering inside his chest like it belongs to a rabbit, running for it's skin. The room spins, he squats on the floor, trying to make everything slow to something his brain and body can cope with. He feels so sick. He wants to call for help but he can't.

All he can do is slip on the floor, huddled in the corner. He feels like the world isn't really there at all, like it was stolen and replaced with something empty, fake. It makes sense in a weird way, the real world gave him feelings of joy. He felt connected to it, every part of it. But either it was taken away or Mike was, every second of every minute of every day all he can do is float into the void. The void of never ending pain and emptiness. He's fallen into a black pit in the depths of his mind.

And no one can help him out of it.

"Rob, you might wanna come over here." Steve says. Will, still attached to him. He let's Will cry into his chest, moving them from the doorway and halfway into the brightly illuminated hallway.

"Who's at the door?" Robin shouts from the other room.

As Will slips to the floor, back resting on the wall of the hallway,

Steve catches him, cradling his head on his hands. Their foreheads so close, they're practically touching.

"What happened?" Steve asks, softly.

Will doesn't respond.

All he can take in is Robin running towards them, the fear in her eyes, panicked shouts, and Steve calming him down. Occasionally hushing him. Will cries more than he has in a long time.

Time has passed, Will knows this as he examines the room, head on top of his, now, numb arm, laying down on a bed. The room is illuminated by the glow of a small lamp on the bedside table. Burgundy bed sheets covering him. He's no longer wet. And seems to be wearing Steve's clothes? They changed him?

He sees Robin, sitting on the bed in front of him, smiling as she watches him open his eyes. "We thought you were dead for a good second there." She says in her silky, calming tone.

Will searches around the room, his eyes going to the door.

"Steve went to go get you water," She reads his mind. "... And he's making you food."

Will can already hear their lectures about 'eating' and how he has to because he's too 'thin'.

"Can I ask you something?"

He nods his head, slightly.

Robin purses her lips, and in that movement Will can see her eyes tearing up, "The burn marks on your chest,"

She knows.

"It's nothing." He stops her frantically, speaking for the first time, his voice hoarse, and now he finally feels how dry his throat is.

She continues on, looking ready to drop the tears down her cheeks, "Did you do that?"

Will doesn't reply back. *She knows. Steve knows too. What are they gonna do to him? He doesn't wanna get shipped off to a hospital. A psych ward. He doesn't wanna be a prisoner, trapped, with the intention of preserving life . So what if he wants to end it?*

"W, Why? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell us?"

He feels a hot tear prick down his cheeks. "I couldn't."

"Why?" She asks again, rubbing the tears away, "I could have helped you. Stopped you from doing that."

"I'm sick," Will's voice is shaky. "You can't help me."

Robin takes a more serious tone, trying her best to stay strong, "If you *ever* feel like doing something like that again, tell me. Damn it, Will you have to talk to me. Talk to someone. Don't hurt yourself, please."

She wraps her arms around him, in a hug, he puts his face on her shoulder, melting into her warm touch. One last tear falling from his face, he can hear Robin's sniffles.

Steve bursts through the door, "So I've got pasta and-" He stops in his tracks, looking at them, and placing down the plate of pasta and the glass of water on the bedside table. Sinking down into the bed.

Robin breaks away from Will, and they both just stare at him for a second. Steve speaks, "You have to know that we love you. Don't - If something happens to you who's gonna hang out with us?" He lightens the mood, the corners of his lips tugging up into a sad smile.

"You have Dustin." Will smiles back, shrugging.

"Dustin is... Dustin." Steve lets out a little laugh, Robin and Will following suit. "You're you. Everyone loves you, don't forget that. Ever. Also, your mom?...Would have a *huge* fucking heart attack."

"I would have a heart attack." Robin says.

"You would kill Robin. Don't do that to us. But most importantly don't do that to yourself."

Robin shifts on the bed, lifting up her pant leg slightly past her ankle. She looks at her leg and then back at Will, sadly. She has scars all over. And that's only just *one* leg. "I know what it's like," Robin takes Will's hand in hers, "You feel like you wanna give up on everything and just lock yourself away...or do much worse, but promise me - Please, Will, promise that you'll talk to me when you feel like that."

Will's lip quivers as he nods. "I promise," he snuffles. *He's not sure if he can keep the promise.*

And so as the quietness grows deeper, Will steadies his rhythm. Sitting at the kitchen table, picking at the oily pasta Steve made for him. The table is wood and round, leaving him on one side, with Robin & Steve on the other, looking at him diligently. They're like concerned parents that ask you to come and "talk" with them about grades or homework or whatever. You just know by the look on their faces it's not good.

"What happened?" Robin finally asks, cutting through the silence.

Will sets down the fork with a clink on his plate. "I don't really wanna talk about it."

There's a moment of silence before Steve begins to speak, he brushes his hair out of his face, "Isn't it Lucas's birthday today? The *big* '18.' "

"Yeah.. it is."

"So I'm guessing you were at his house? I know you couldn't have walked from yours all the way here."

"I was at Mike's." He responds, dryly.

Steve looks taken aback, he crosses his arms, leaning back in his chair. Both Robin and Will look at him curiously as he figures it out. Will knows he's putting the puzzle pieces together.

"So something happened between you and Mike."

Will mumbles, "Something already happened."

Robin motions with her hand, "Expand."

"The real reason we, uh, stopped-," He can barely get the words out without tripping over them. Will looks down back to his plate of food, and around the illuminated kitchen, wanting nothing more than this conversation to be over, he can't look them in the eye as he says the next part, "He called me a faggot."

"What?" Robin asks, but Will knows it's not a question. She understood him, and it looks like she's fuming. "I'm gonna kick his ass."

Will stops her, "No!"

He's not even sure why he says it.

Both of them look at him, confused.

"He's my soulmate."

Their faces fall flat. They both look thoroughly disappointed, and disgusted (*not at Will*). "Are you shitting me?" Steve replies. Will makes a little movement with his head, and Steve pinches the bridge between his brow and his nose, like he can't believe it. "Wow."

Will dry laughs. "Yeah. Wow. My luck is just great. Of course my soulmate is a homophobic asshole, who also," He picks back up his fork and redirects his focus back on the pasta, (*which he **really** doesn't wanna eat but Robin keeps on looking at him*) , "Used to be my best friend."

A knock on the door is heard. Steve gets up from the couch, already walking out of the living room and into the hallway, out of sight. They've been watching tv for the past ten minutes, flipping channels occasionally to find something good. The damned thing keeps on cutting out.

Must be gremlins.

"Want me to make popcorn?" Robin asks, her arm draped on the

couch backing, her head resting on it, "We can relax, watch a movie, get fat.. sound good?"

Will smiles. "Sounds great."

He can hear the muffled sound of Steve talking to someone. Robin gets up from the sofa, walking a few steps into the kitchen. She flicks on the light, reaching in the cupboard. "Who is it?" She shouts, loud enough for Steve to hear her.

"The kids!" He shouts back.

Jesus christ. They can't leave him alone for more than an hour?

"They wanna know if Will's here," Steve pauses, "What do you want me to tell them?"

"Go AWAY!" Will shouts. He doesn't wanna talk to them. Not right now.

More muffled talking, then he hears El's voice and... Mike's? He's here? Why the hell is he here? Steve's voice is getting increasingly more irritated, Will can tell, even if he doesn't know the full context of what's going on. "Back the fuck away from me." Will hears Steve sneer. And that's when he has to get up and see what's happening.

He walks down the hall, watching as the situation gets more hostile

between Mike and Steve.

The hallway overhead light begins flickering. Faster with each step Will takes.

Seriously, what the hell is happening?

Will meets Steve at the door frame, not stepping outside, but now he can see everyone. El standing next to Mike, now wearing sweatpants, Dustin and Max paired together, Max wearing a jacket that Will knows is Mike's, and Lucas standing off to the side, shifting his weight between his two feet as he shivers.

"Stop it!" Will shouts, and they break apart. The flickering of the light dissipates, as Will continues on, looking at Mike, taking in his form.

He has the kind of face that stops Will in his tracks. He guesses he's gotten used to that, the sudden pause in his natural expression when he looks Mike's way, followed by overcompensating with a nonchalant gaze and a weak smile. Of course the blush that accompanied it was a dead give-away. He has tousled black hair, which is thick and lustrous. A little coil from his curls coming out of his raincoat hood. His eyes are a mesmerising deep brown, flecks of light performed ballets throughout.

Will remembers his playful smile. His perfect, soft lips. His hands, a little bit bigger than Will's, that held his as he stared deep into his eyes.

He saw none of that. He felt none of that. Will didn't know who he

was looking at. "Just go home, Mike. Stop pretending like you actually care about me."

Mike backs away from the door, stumbling as he walks backwards, then Will looks at the rest of them, unable to glance at Mike another second. "I'm fine guys, really. Thanks for coming to check on me but I'm good."

Will looks at his sister. "I'm gonna stay at Steve's tonight. Please tell mom when she gets home."

"Sure," She smiles sadly.

"You're the best. Love you." He says to her.

"Love you too. Feel better."

"Thanks."

They tell him to feel better, Steve shouts something unintelligible at them, and all Will can focus on is Mike. The blood pounds in his ears. His heart thuds in his chest. His hands shake. Will's vision disfigures, as if he were looking through a fish-eye lens.

You should hate him, Will thinks. You should hate him for what he said. He's not worth it. Is he?

He can't hate him, no matter how hard he tries.

Will clutches the door knob as Steve closes the door, head resting, his hands wrapped so tightly around it that his nails are practically digging into his palms. Breathing is hard. *Really* hard. He hears the stifled sob he gives out, a great tremor overtaking him as the tears race down his cheeks, he can hold the heartbreak no longer. He swipes at his eyes but the tears come anyway. Once that first tear broke free, the rest followed in an unbroken stream. Will falls to the floor in a disheveled heap as his grief pours out in a flood of uncontrollable tears. He should have known it was gonna be *this* type of night right after he ran out of the Wheelers.

"Hey. Hey." Will hears Steve say, as he embraces him letting the torrent of his tears soak through his shirt. Steve can probably hear him silently screaming, suffocating with each breath. He runs his fingers through Will's hair, in an attempt to calm the silent war within his mind.

Steve and Robin lead him to the bedroom, and he flops down on the bed, knees drawn close to his chest, hugging a pillow tightly, accepting the torment. Creating a huge pool of tears. His lungs rummage for oxygen, and his sobbing has the same force of drowning. The flesh under Will's ribcage throbs, his cheeks burn, and his mind brings up memories that make the tears continue.

well, if we're both going crazy then we'll go crazy together, right?

yeah, crazy together.

There's no way he's doing anything else but crying for the remainder of the night.

5. Book Report

Summary for the Chapter:

He shifts his weight on both legs, bringing the phone extension with him to the soft burgundy chair in the living room, plopping down on it. Will exhales as he speaks again, one hand pinching the arch between his eyebrows and his nose, the other clutching the phone. He just wants to sleep. "How do you know that?"

"El called me last night," He looks into the kitchen, glaring at her. She sends back a similar expression, shrugging her shoulders. "She told me what happened. Everything that happened," Great, now El's telling everyone his business. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Notes for the Chapter:

warnings - mentioned self-harm thoughts. very brief suicidal reference. internalized homophobia.

The late autumn breeze pinks his cheeks. The warmth that had been in the wind just last week had either evaporated into the sky or leached into the earth. A sign that winter is to come. The frigid air has a way of keeping him in the moment, wicking away body heat faster than it is replaced. It's one of those days when normal clothes aren't enough, when they feel thinner than they are. Breaths rise in puffs, hands stuffed into pockets tightly and there is a briskness to his movements. His only desire right now is to get to his car and get the hell out here.

Thank god for Robin giving him the day off. He can just go home and be comfortably numb, wrapped up in tons of blankets. Asleep until he dies. That would be preferable.

His mother called. Three times, to make sure Will was okay and safe. She wanted to talk to Will directly, not Robin. He assumed El didn't tell her what happened for him to be staying the night at Steve's, and for that he was thankful. Steve had offered for him to stay but Will declined for two reasons. One, his mom would go crazy with worry. And two, he doesn't wanna be around Steve and Robin anymore (*as bad as it sounds*) , he thinks he just needs to be alone. Untampered with. Although home might not be the best place for that, that's where his bed is. He learned that Robin moves around a lot in her sleep, flailing her arms and legs, and Steve? Will could hear his snoring all the way from the living room.

He leans his head against the wheel, closing his eyes. He wants to cry. Scream. Rage. But now he can barely feel a thing. If it was anyone else Will would have gotten over it by now. Two years goddamn it. Almost three by now. If it was Max or Dustin.. or even El. But with Mike it's something different, a different kind of heartbreak. Truly knowing he'll never be with his soulmate. Mike was always there for him, always present. Ever since that fateful day Will said yes. If anyone would accept Will it would be Mike. His best friend. Their relationship has always been more than that - meant more to Will than with anyone else. Maybe that was the problem. He was too dependent from the beginning.

Entering the house is an easy auditory bath of sweet music from the radio, his eyes are greeted by old family photographs and the well-loved furniture of years. "I'm home," Will calls out, taking off his boots and jacket. Leather doesn't react well to water. He knows that now.

"Will?" Three voices call out. His mother, El, and he knows the last voice is Max.

He turns around the bend straight into the kitchen taking in the sight of the three of them, Max and El sitting by the table as Joyce cooks breakfast. All in their pajamas. He feels like this morning is going on forever and it's only 11:30. A song he knows is familiar fades out, leaving quietness until he speaks again to his mom, who wraps him up into a big hug, "I'm okay if you're wondering." He audibly muffles over her shoulder. "More than okay."

As they break apart Joyce looks at him, analyzing every bit of his face, searching for a speck of untruthfulness. If she notices anything, she doesn't say it. "I'm making pancakes.. did you eat yet? Do you want some?"

"M' Not hungry. But thanks."

His mom turns her back to the kitchen wall, and he walks over to the table. Hovering over it as El and Max look at him vigilantly with clear worry. Max raises her eyebrow, and talks in a hushed tone, "Are you actually okay though?"

El adds on, "Friends don't lie."

He knows that by now.

"I'm fine. Promise," He picks at his shirt sleeve unconsciously, "But y'know thanks for- Oh shit, Nancy!"

How could he forget about her?

Will races to the phone, dialing the Wheelers number. Hopefully Mike wouldn't be the one to answer. Static. The number is dialing-

"Wheeler Residence how can I help you?" Karen's voice comes through.

"Hi, Mrs. Wheeler. It's Will. Can I talk to Nancy?"

"Sure." She clasps the receiver, shouting, "Nancy! Will's on the phone!"

He hears Mike in the background, "Will's on the phone?"

"It's not for you! NANCY! PHONE!"

"Jesus, mom. I'm coming!" Nancy shouts back.

In a second Nancy responds, "Will? I was just getting ready to go to your place. I'll be there in a few-"

"Actually I'm not feeling that great today." He cuts her off, "Can we have a rain check?"

"Is this about what happened with my asshole brother?"

"Hey!" Mike screams.

"Shut up dickhead! I'm on the phone!" Nancy counters.

"Language!" Mrs.Wheeler says feverishly.

He shifts his weight on both legs, bringing the phone extension with him to the soft burgundy chair in the living room, plopping down on it. Will exhales as he speaks again, one hand pinching the arch between his eyebrows and his nose, the other clutching the phone. *He just wants to sleep.* "How do you know that?"

"El called me last night," He looks into the kitchen, glaring at her. She sends back a similar expression, shrugging her shoulders. "She told me what happened. *Everything* that happened," Great, now El's telling everyone his business. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know." He shrugs as if Nancy can see him over the phone, "What was I supposed to say? Your brother told me off?"

"I don't know.. we just usually tell each other this stuff."

Will takes comfort in the older Wheeler sibling, although every time he looks in her eyes, all he can see is Mike. Their similar features. They're similar but at the same time, very different mannerisms. Their shared stubbornness and determination.

Staring isn't quite the word for what Nancy does, though she'd fit the dictionary definition to a t. Her eyes rest, not unblinking but slowed; yet the effect is soft and inviting instead of harsh. Perhaps it is her lips that give away her intention, not quite smiling but tilting as if they mean to. She always gives him an occasional glance as the conversation slows, cutting into her blueberry pancakes. Too bad he's too fucked to go out in public right now.

"...Yeah, I know."

The static fizzles as silence protrudes over the phone line. "Ok." Nancy says after a moment, "I'll see you later then, I guess. I'm not sure if I'll have time because of my paper but we'll figure something out. Love you little brother."

"Love you too, Nance. Bye."

"Bye."

He gets up, attaching the light blue phone back into the wall. He walks past the kitchen and down the hallway, shouting, "I'm going to sleep!"

When he enters his room it's in a manic state, much like him. Clothes thrown everywhere on the floor, covering almost every inch. Random garbage thrown on his desk and left there. Ripped up and discarded sketches on his closet floor. Will sighs, flopping down onto his bed on his backside. Wrapping the duvet cover over his shivering body. He needs heat. He craves it. If they weren't in the kitchen he would-

You're supposed to keep your promise. Stop hurting yourself.

The music that brings Will to dreamland is a song he's positive he's heard a thousand times before and never enough. The chords are like a well worn path, one his brain follows so willingly. In moments he is asleep, body relaxed, and breathing steadily.

Several hours have passed by now. Will made his way out of his cocoon of a room and into the common area, chatting with his sister, mother and Max as Joyce got started on dinner. Max left shortly after, claiming household duties she had to catch up on. Will wishes things would get better with her situation and step-father. He's been a lot more crazy lately, having regularly scheduled outbursts that end in Max's mother being hurt. Or even Max herself.

It's not until Joyce asks him to watch a movie with her and El does he realize he's been so focused on himself lately, he's been icing out the most important person in his life by far. His mom.

"Sure. I'd love that." He smiles at her. She smiles back, sweetly. In her eyes are the reflection and reminder of pain, grief, loss. She's been through so much. Stuff she definitely shouldn't have been in. The image of Lonnie slamming her up against the wall burns deep in his mind.

He disregards the negative thoughts and images as they make their way to the couch. El brought with her a huge bowl of microwave popcorn. Just as the first bite of cold wind creeps under his pajamas he leans his head on his mother's shoulder. In seconds his body is moulded to her own, sharing her body heat as easily as she shares her heart. She smiles at him, warm and soft as the movie begins to play. A soft fuzzy blanket is draped over them by El, words that Will can no longer decipher being said. The title sequence of [The Breakfast](#)

Club plays.

August 19th, 1985

Movie nights at the Wheeler's were always chaotic.

"We need to watch Back to the Future! What good is it to have it on tape if we never watch it?" Dustin reasons.

"No! Gremlins." El says, "It's me and mom's favorite movie,"

It was initially weird when El started calling Will's mom her mom too, but after a few weeks Will learned it wasn't that odd. She lost her father. And her birth mother. She needs a strong maternal figure in her life. He and Jonathan tried their best to welcome her, and not be bitter for having to share a room because El's now staying in Jonathan's. He didn't know what to say to her. Yeah, he'd met her before but they never really talked. What exactly do you say to the girl that saved your life two times in a row?

"We've seen that like twenty times this month. I vote for Stand By Me." Will replies.

Lucas takes a tortilla chip from the bowl, crunching on it, "Me too."

Max looks at him, then smirks, "I vote Back to the Future."

"Mike?" Dustin asks.

Lucas bumps his shoulder, grinning, "You know he's just gonna go with whatever Will says."

Will looks at Mike, who's smiling at him, and somehow he can practically read his thoughts. He's totally voting for Stand By Me.

"Oh, god. They're doing it again." Max says, breaking their moment, pointing a finger between the two.

"The freaky mind reading thing." Dustin adds.

"Perks of being best friends since we were five." Mike smiles, then turns his gaze back to Will, "Also, being tragically in love with William Byers." He jokes, putting his hand up to his head, dramatically. In that motion Will sees their string pull them close together.

"Oh, fuck you." Will says back, a heat crawling up to his cheeks, tinting them light pink.

"Right here? In front of everyone?" Mike replies, trying his best to stifle his laughter, "...Ok, babe."

"Oh, god. And I thought you and El were bad." Max says, after a second of complete silence and everyone staring at them like they're crazy, "We get it. You're like totally gone for each other." She jokes, but it hits a little too close to home.

"It's movie night and we're not watching movies," She continues on, "Put the goddamn tape in the tv already." Mike frowned, but complied with her request, getting up from the couch and fumbling to the tv, awkwardly, inserting the vhs.

As the movie started, the kids assumed their normal positions: Lucas and Dustin right smack in front of the TV, Max and El cuddled on the recliner chair with a grey blanket over them, and Mike and Will on the couch with a foot of space between them.

Mike scooted closer to Will.

Will's heart rate sped up. Why was his body doing this? His palms started to sweat, and he felt the sudden urge to- he's not going to even think it. Not going to validate it.

*Deep down, he knew what was going on. He tried to ignore it, but he couldn't. Mike's his soulmate. He's known it since they first met. It was later reinforced, time and time again. **Epecially** reinforced after their fight that day in the rain. Everything sort of fell into place, how he felt when Mike was around, how he felt seeing Mike and El kiss. How he felt watching them break up. And it's not a platonic link. Then he thought that everyone was like this, and got like this when they saw or were with their close friends. He knew that wasn't the case. The link must be romantic. But how? He's not queer. He's not like that. He's normal.*

Right?

Towards the end of the movie, both Mike and Will got incredibly tired. They could barely keep their eyes open. Mike laid his head on his shoulder, which made Will's heart jump and an electric current go down his spine. Underneath the blanket, Mike interlaced their fingers, sliding

them together. Will intentionally slowed his breathing, already dozing off.

CLICK!

And they're both jolted awake. El hovered above them grinning, holding a camera out. "I'm saving this." She says as the film whirs out.

"Ooo." Max smirks, body sprawled out on the carpet, "Blackmail?"

"Yup!" She pops the word, then looks between the two, "You know, you two look really comfy... The Wheeler's and Byers just can't stay away from each other."

Will was right, she's definitely hanging out with Max too much.

*Will takes in their current position, it's **very** different from before. How did they even get like this? Mike's arms are wrapped around his waist, his head on his chest, their legs slotted together, and they're taking up the entirety of the couch. Their legs dangling off of the small yellow sofa. For the most part Mike kept his head buried in Will's chest, his black tufty hair splayed out as he spoke, "Leave us alone."*

It wasn't unusual for them to be touchy, but this was next level. They'd never really cuddled like this. Well, there was that one time Mike had a nightmare while Will was staying over. That doesn't really count because he was under distress. Will's heart is beating more rapidly every second.

He felt the heat of Mike's body warmth melt onto his own skin.

He can see Mike's chest rising and falling, with every breath he takes, as he's practically on top of Will at this point. No sense of personal space whatsoever.

"Hah! Finally." Dustin says, as he emerges down the stairs, licking the chocolate pudding off of his spoon. Lucas followed closely behind him, clasping onto multiple bags of cheese puffs.

What exactly does that mean?

"I swear to god, if anyone says anything else, I'm kicking you all out." Mike groans into his chest, grabbing for Will's fingers again, slipping them together.

"I'm pretty sure there's one person Mike isn't gonna kick out." Lucas teases, and Will watches as everyone nods, grinning.

Mike looks up at him, and it seems like Will is the bigger out of the two, although Mike has a good three inches over him. As Mike leant forward Will's pulse raced. Looking into Mike's eyes he saw deep pools of dark brown that displayed his soul. His lips touched Will's cheek. Time stopped. His heart came to a halt. His breath caught in his throat. They're fingers locked together similar to puzzle pieces. The soft brush of Mike's mouth left the side of his face, the exact spot burned and tingled at the contact. A hot blazing fire pulsed throughout him. A small grin crept onto Mike's face and his cheeks painted themselves rose red. He buried his face back into Will's chest, silently.

"Are you guys happy now?" Mike snarks back to all of them.

Will's breaths become unsteady. He has no idea what's going on in the movie or what was just said. The tv audibly hums. The glass cracks. It short circuits. Flames arise. Joyce jumps up frantically running into the kitchen, throwing water on top of it. *Holy shit.*

It was all chalked up to the TV being extremely old. Although that didn't explain the glass cracking, and Will could have sworn he saw El looking at him weirdly. *Almost like she knows something is up.*

He sits down in his hard wood seat, Mrs. Crenshaw going on and on about her character analysis of Romeo and Juliet. Dustin gives him the occasional glance to see if he's alright and Will responds with a quick, short smile. Other students tell their take on the play. Most of it is just sexual jokes riddled with deeply ingrained misogynist ideas. Then it's Mike's turn. He says the usual crap. It's not like Will was expecting anything else from a dumb (*honorary*) jock. He caught Mike staring at him two separate times. Two times! Will kept on grimacing at him then turning away. Mike did that thing that he does all the time when he's disheartened, he slumps his shoulders and slightly frowns, furrowing his eyebrows.

"Does anyone else have anything else they'd like to share?" Mrs.Crenshaw asks in her squeaky voice. Silence fills up the classroom.

Will speaks up for the first time ever in that class, it seems like, and immediately regrets it. "I do."

"Go ahead."

He proceeds to look Mike dead in the eye, "Did you even read it?" He says passive-aggressively. "Romeo wasn't in love with Juliet because he was still in love with Rosaline. He was thinking about her minutes before he met Juliet. The whole reason he went to the Capulet's party was because he wanted to see her. So of course he's gonna like the first girl he sees, who's the cousin of Rosaline, who could help him get his mind off of her and his unrequited love. He uses her the entire time. And then there's Juliet who's no better. She uses him so she doesn't have to marry Paris. She also wanted to rebel from her parents, so she obviously chose the guy from the family her parents hated. The entire reason behind her taking the poison is because she doesn't wanna get married to Paris. She uses Romeo as an excuse for that. She would rather die than get married. Romeo kills himself because it was too much for him to love two people at the same time. Juliet was thirteen and had never been in a relationship before. And Romeo was known to fall in love a lot. If you were actually paying attention, the timeline of how long they were together was five days. Pretty short for it to be considered "love". Romeo and Juliet isn't a love story. It's a tragedy."

His eyes break from Mike and back to the teacher as she speaks, shoving her glasses back up her nose. "Good take on it, Mr. Byers. C."

A C? The kids that had put no real effort into it got higher grades than that. Mike had gotten a higher grade for the generic shit he spewed.

"Oh, that is such bullshit." Dustin looks at him like he's crazy. Will can't even see Mike's face but he assumes it's something of a similar nature. *The quiet kid finally snaps.*

"Excuse me?" She says, one hand on her hip, eyebrow quirked like

she can believe what she's just heard.

"I don't know.." He shrugs, "It's called reading in between the *fucking* lines."

"Mr. Byers!"

He got two days of after school detention and an F. *How wonderful.*

Will used to see the world as it was, a beautiful array of colors and shapes, ideas and formulas, voids and space, love and fear. It was all a canvas that left just enough space for him to paint his own story. All he sees now is bleakness, pain, and suffering. Endless shadows and eye piercing white glows.

The tone of the painting is muted, the style reminiscent of Monet. Each stroke has a smudging quality that renders the image watery, like a reflection in a rippled puddle. The scene is a street in New York. He paints from memory from when they had last visited Jonathan. Umbrella bearing pedestrians battling against the rain and yellow taxi cabs rumbling by. Rain-splattered windows and rivers of people that moved in each direction. They all moved so randomly, pushing against one another, flowing, like water. The mixed paints decorate his arms and hands. Will brushes a hand to push his hair out of his face, and as he does so a stain of light green drapes itself across his forehead in a streak.

The painting is all in bright oils but somehow it's still dark. It reminds Will of the poison that can lurk behind a pretty face, the subjects that had that look about them, like beneath the smile is an entirely

separate thought track. It unnerves him. Like the people are looking out from beneath their own skin, like their flesh and bone is no more than a mask. The brush strokes are tiny and controlled.

Perhaps it would be nice to never be anxious, always in complete control, never attached or love sick. But he couldn't wish it, not really. It's in his DNA by now. It makes him, well - him.

He's around eighty five percent done and almost three and a half hours in, when he hears a knock on his window. He disregards it, thinking maybe it was the wind. Or a tree branch.

Then the knock comes again.

Will pushes his seat away from his desk, getting up. Abandoning his piece for now. He pushes the curtain from the window away, opening the window in a few seconds. The wind rushes into his room and chills his already chilled bones. When he peers out, all he sees into the dead of night is a figure bolting down the street. Then he looks at the roof by his window. A rock sits on top of a book, holding a note in place. He clambers out, reaching for the items, and throws the rock down to the ground with a thud.

When Will resituates himself at his desk, he reads what the note says in the dim light of his room.

I think you were right. Fuck Mrs.Chrenshaw.

Here's another play by Shakespeare you might find annoying. Tell me what you think.

-Mike

He scoffs, then takes the book in his paint stained hands. All's Well
That Ends Well.

Ironic.

6. I wear my memories like a shroud (I try to speak, but words collapse)

Summary for the Chapter:

He wakes up feeling like he's falling, sometimes, but mostly he wakes up with a tight, empty knot in his chest that makes it hard to breathe, that makes it hard to get out of bed in the morning.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter title taken from [Halloween by Siouxsie and the Banshees](#)

warnings - very briefly referenced self harm. implied eating disorder.

"Don't you think that's a little weird?"

"Lots of things are weird."

Will frowns a little, trying to follow Lucas's gaze but he's not actually looking at anything so it's kind of impossible.

"You're weird." Lucas adds quietly. When Will looks back up at him he's got one of those wicked grins on.

"I'm...not."

"Nice comeback."

"I still can't believe you."

"Oh my god, it's been almost a week already. Just get over it." Max huffs before taking an aggressive bite of her sandwich.

"You freaked out because you've apparently never experienced a hug before."

"I've been hugged before, stupid." Max mutters.

Will snorts and goes back to eating his sandwich, keeping his eyes pointed straight ahead. "Alright, noted. Maxine Mayfield is a skittish baby animal who-

Max reaches over and palms the side of Will's face, shoving him over.

He can't help but giggle as he sits up, forcing a frown back onto his face. "Hey, careful. My head still hurts. Jesus, I didn't think I wasn't allowed to hug my friend."

"I said I was sorry."

"It really hurt."

"You caught me off guard!"

"Who reacts like that? Even for you, it was way too violent."

"It's not like I had a chance to think about what I was doing. I thought..."

"Okay, okay. Stop. Let's just... stop. This is stupid. Give me your pop rocks and I'll forgive you for the brain damage."

Will blinks and peers at the redhead out of the corner of his eye. She's smiling.

"Like you weren't mentally defective before."

He has to admit, he and Max have become close ever since Billy's funeral. They have a friendly game of back and forth, though Max has never been anything but nice to him. She told him he's good to talk to because he understands what it's like.

Sort of.

But he still sucks at it.

Mike pauses, eyes dropping to the floor while he takes a deep breath and, "I'm sorry. About last night." He says to the ground, voice tinted with unmistakable annoyance. **Sorry that you tried to kiss me?** "I didn't mean to... you know." He stares blankly ahead for several seconds, clenching and unclenching his jaw before sighing and ducking out of the room.

Will blinks. **'No, I don't know!'** He wants to scream, but doesn't.

"Don't tell me you still care about what he thinks after all these years."

He frowns. "I don't know if I'll ever stop caring about what he thinks."

"You loved him," El says, "I think that's normal."

"So did you."

"It wasn't the same for me."

Will closes his eyes. "No, it wasn't."

October 27, 1988

“You going to Liz's party?”

“I guess.” Will replies to Dustin's question in the least excited way possible. He might as well have just said no. “I...don't know yet.” And he doesn't. Not because he hasn't thought about it, because he has. A lot. He's mulled over his options, weighed the pros and cons, done the math (math will never be the same for him again) and right now, all of the reasons why going to this party would be a horrible idea start swirling around in his head. And the number one reason is:

He knows there'll be alcohol at the party.

But really the number one reason is:

He's not sure if he'll be able to control himself - regardless of the alcohol.

He knows he will likely not be drinking said alcohol. He knows that Dustin will also likely not be drinking said alcohol because Dustin drinking alcohol would be like a ten-year old drinking alcohol.

But he also knows that stranger things have happened.

“Maybe.” Will adds, trying to sound blasé.

Keep on Loving You cuts off as Robin turns the dial on the radio, searching for another station. The static coming from the big blocky stereo swells in the air. Dustin groans into the palms of his hands, a pencil tucked behind a piece of unruly brown hair.

It's a tradition of sorts by now, one they honor at all costs. Every Tuesday for the past year the remaining party members come down to the arcade to visit Will on his shift. They sit in the back room, do homework, and study for typical, regular, boring tests.

Will sits next to Max and Dustin on one side of the table while El sits in between Robin and Steve.

Steve's in his own world, scribbling away at his revision paper, writing in handwriting even he sometimes can't find legible. (*"Wait." He mutters to himself, "Does that even make sense?"*) He erases the sentence he just wrote.

Robin helps point out a couple of mistakes El makes with her math equations, and Max complains, as usual, about wanting to do something ‘*actually*’ fun and not ‘*boring*’ (*her words.*)

She eventually ends up getting up during some point to relieve some stress and play her favorite arcade game, Dig Dug. Even after all

these years she has the top score and is yet to be unseated as #1.

Occasionally when Dustin needs the help he practices reading his lines and it's always some big ordeal about Steve or Will or any one of them needing to be more dramatic when responding to the text. They always end up laughing because Dustin's a huge theater nerd.

They're all huddled together in the back room. Robin is vigilant of any customers coming in by sparing the occasional glance to the cracked opened door. Her eyes are like silver lightning, not missing a thing.

Papers of all kinds splayed out on top of the small white coffee stained foldable table, along with pencil's that are working and erasing. The muffled talking to themselves each of them do occasionally is heard.

" *Rob!* Pick a station already," Dustin pleads, shuffling between four worksheets.

" *I am* , Henderson. Chill out." Robin's thumbs work, turning the knob, and changing the station at least a hundred times. The different style songs fade in and out, leaving them to hear the tune, and a one-off word, for just a second.

Max looks over to Will's page for the answer to one of the chemistry questions and when Will catches her, he simply sighs and pushes the paper closer.

As *Bicycle Race* comes on Robin cheers, "Aha!" She exclaims. Steve looks equally impressed with her seemingly impossible feat.

"Woah." Max and Will say in unison, turning to each other.

"An actual *good* song." El finishes.

"*I thank thee.*" Dustin says in his most posh accent, and it doesn't take long before they're all singing along the lyrics between giggles.

It's moments like these, when they're all acting like complete idiots, cracking smiles at each other that Will feels joy. The music, somehow, uplifts his spirit.

Steve does air guitar, his face in utter concentration going along with the beat as Max and Eleven tap along with their pencils. The rest of them settle their clearly off tune singing as they focus back on their homework.

"Hey, Byers! Wait up." Robin calls out just before he's about to join the others outside. He stands by the door, whipping his head around to see her by the Galaga machine.

Steve and Robin need a ride to Steve's place, since they're hanging out (and Steve managed to get a bunch of parking tickets so his car got towed.) So Will has to drop them off and Dustin as-well. He's the

designated driver .

Max is staying over again, as she has been doing that more often lately, and Joyce loves her company, so it's no problem.

She zips up her jacket, looking between Will and the door, "Are you doing okay?"

It's always the same crap.

Are you feeling fine? You can tell me anything. You know that right? I'm here for you.

Before it was his mom but come on, Robin too?

"Hey, I get it." She says, as if she can read his mind. "Alright? I'm just checking in."

"Yeah. Sorry." He brushes a hand through his messy bangs, pushing them aside. "I'm doing better." *Liar. Friends don't lie.* Will can hear El in the back of his head. "Well - I guess. It's only been a couple days."

Robin tugs up the sleeves of her jacket past her wrists. "If you ever feel like doing something. You call me." Her tone of voice is dead serious, " *Understand?* You call me."

Will starts to dream about his dad pretty often.

He thinks maybe he's always dreamt about him, in some way or another, but the dreams become longer and leave such an impression in his heart that he actually remembers them when he wakes up. His father leaves them, this is normal, this is expected, but he starts to talk. Right before he grabs the doorknob and walks out Will's life, seemingly, forever, he pauses and turns back and although he's faceless in his dream, Will knows he's looking right at him. He tells Will he doesn't love him and he can't stand to be near him, and he can't help but think he's probably right.

He wakes up feeling like he's falling, sometimes, but mostly he wakes up with a tight, empty knot in his chest that makes it hard to breathe, that makes it hard to get out of bed in the morning.

"Mom."

"Hmm?"

"Were you and dad ever in love?"

There's a long beat of silence as his mother slowly looks up from where she's standing in the kitchen and turns herself to look at Will.

Now, Will Byers, at age eight, feels like he's choking. "Is it because of me? Because I'm unlovable?" he says, his skin prickling in shame.

His mother drops her arms to her sides, and takes a step towards him, but then stops, collecting herself first.

“Will,” she says, her voice low, serious and careful, “Don’t you ever, for even one second, think that anything your father did is your fault.”

She swallows, hard, and tries to keep her breathing even. She walks forward until she can put both of her hands on each of his shoulders, so she can look at his face properly. “And you are the most lovable boy on this earth. You are caring, and sweet, and creative. I love you and your brother more than I have ever loved anything or anyone. Don’t you ever call yourself unlovable again, understand?”

Will nods his head jerkily, but he feels a hot prickling sensation behind his eyes, and he wants to leave the room right now, but his mom is pulling him to her chest and holding him close to her heartbeat.

“Will you go to sleep already?”

El looks at him flatly. “You’re not sleeping either. I know what you look like when you’re sleeping.”

“So you’re a creep. Do you want something from me?”

She sits up on his bed and crosses her legs. The silver moonlight

filters in through the window, casting a soft light over their faces. Morning is fast approaching, but it feels like the night could stretch on forever.

If it was any other night, Will would have jabbed his sister in the ribs or perhaps tugged her back into her own bedroom. But moving is too much of an effort.

“Why are you being so quiet?” She prods at his arm with a finger.

“Sorry,” Will replies, because that's his default answer, “Just thinking.”

“You do that a lot.”

“Yeah,” he says, forcing a careful smile, and finally making eye contact with her, “I know.”

October 28th, 1988

Will wakes to a stifling warmth pressed against his back. He groans, shifts and groans when the soreness in his limbs wakes with him. It takes him too much effort to flop onto his back and there's no

mistaking the hair peeking from below the covers.

He peeks at the clock on the bedside table, 5:38, decides it's too early and lays there on his back, staring at the white ceiling, listening to El's peaceful breathing fanning against his skin. He needs to go to the bathroom and he's thirsty to a painful extent but he's also too lazy, and too comfortable to move.

Will pulls himself through the rest of the day.

He walks into the kitchen and finds three sets of eyes, boring right into his soul, cradling mugs.

His mom, face pinched, leaning against the kitchen counter.

El yawning, hair a complete mess, and sipping her earl grey.

Max squints at him, in her blue striped pajamas, nursing a cup of coffee.

Everything is fine until he tries to eat. He retches at six forty two after scarfing down a plate of eggs his mother cooked up, his stomach turning inside out.

School goes how it always does. People avoid him like the plague. He

runs into Lucas in the bathroom, they exchange sorries and not much else.

Robin is tired, from lack of sleep and barely speaks to him during their afternoon shift. Things are slow at the arcade, like they always are.

Steve drops by. He brings them sandwiches and they eat in the back.

Jonathan calls for the first time in months. Turns out he got some of his photography featured in a magazine. Will tries to sound enthusiastic, he's happy for him, of course he is, but he doesn't have the energy to show or sound it.

There's not much of high school left to go. In less than a year he'll be out of Hawkins. He'll be able to breathe again, far away from the whispered gossiping, the shadows, and Mike fucking Wheeler.

His legs feel like jelly as he walks up the porch steps, the thought of his bed is calling to him like a beacon of light in the darkness.

Will shrugs off his jacket, makes way to his room through the empty, silent house and drowns out the rest of the world with music. Something heavy and fierce as he contemplates scooping up the book on his desk.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm sorry this took so long!! A lot has been happening in my life as of late and I didn't really have time to focus on this, but I'm ready now more than ever. I figured I wasn't giving it my all, and I'm starting to put more effort into this again because I'm feeling more confident in the route the story is going.

I've been staring at a screen for the past four hours. I am very. tired.

7. A Little Push

Summary for the Chapter:

They fall quiet, and Will takes in the view of crowded, cramped people; his cheeks red, as a result of the hot air in the room, the insistent thump of his heartbeat, and the current situation he's found himself in.

or:

The kids go to a halloween party, and Will makes amends with an old friend.

Notes for the Chapter:

inserts flaming elmo meme (you know the one)

I'm sorry for the awkward exposition that I forced into in some places here *sobs quietly into my pillow* I'll make it up in the future, I swear.

Song mentioned:

[I Was Made For Lovin' You by KISS](#)

warnings - underage drinking. implied eating disorder. mentioned recreational drug usage. suicidal idealization.

October 31st, 1988

After much convincing he relented and gave in, agreeing to the plan. It was mostly El who did the so-called “convincing” as he can't seem to say no to his younger sister, even if it's the most obnoxious thing in the world. El has that effect to her at times.

He finds himself sprawled out on Eleven's bed, already in costume, occasionally glancing at his sister doing her makeup in the full length mirror attached to the back of her door. He's reading some tabloid magazine that doesn't interest him much, flipping through the pages as a pass-time. Dustin and Max should be here any minute.

"You look just like her."

El pauses applying her lipstick. "Who? Veronica Sawyer? Cause' that's kinda what I'm going for."

"I was gonna say mom but whatever." He rolls his eyes and holds back a smile.

The tone of her voice doesn't match the smile plastered on her face. "Is it possible to look like someone you aren't related to?"

Will shrugs. "I wouldn't be surprised if we were actually separated at birth."

She laughs. "Dustin thinks we're twins."

"Creepy little sibling bond." He imitates Dustin's voice poorly, which just makes El laugh harder.

"At the beginning of freshman year, everyone and I mean *everyone* was convinced we were an item."

He scrunches up his nose as if he had just smelled something terrible, making a disgusted sound. "Ugh. Don't remind me."

"Shut up," She replies in her most serious voice before giving him an offended scowl. El crosses her arms over her chest and glares, a tiny stifled laugh accidentally letting loose. "*You would be so lucky.*"

"*Eleven! Will!*" Joyce shouts. "Dustin and Max are here!"

The two share a look and Will springs to his feet. His sister holds him at arm's length and then redirects her gaze to the mirror and Will follows her. He looks at himself, tight blue jeans on, red puffer jacket over a jean one. Then to El in a multi patterned black and gray blazer, little pink flowers adorning the side, shoulder padding, and underneath it a button up white shirt, with a matching black skirt.

She grins, " *Total* Badasses."

"Total Badasses." He agrees, tilting his head.

"Ready to go and have the best night of our lives?"

Will narrows his eyes. "That's an over exaggeration."

"Look at me." She commands, gripping Will's face. "Say it with me: *It's gonna be the best night of our lives.*"

"It's gonna be the best night of our lives..." He trails off with zero excitement.

"God, you're such a mood killer," She deflates and shoves him away from her playfully. "I meant that we're gonna go to our first high school party as seniors and get wicked plastered. Are you ready, *Will the Wise*, to take part in this new foreign adventure?"

He snorts and reaches for the door handle, opening it. "*Nerd.*"

El follows him out and down the hallway, "Hey! Don't call me a nerd, *nerd*."

He silently leans against the doorframe, hands in the back of his jean pockets, and watches as El swats a hand into Dustin's brown curls to fix his already perfect hair.

"One more." Joyce negotiates, camera in hand snapping another photo. " *One* . One more."

"*Mom!*" El and Will say in unison.

"I know." She chuckles and sets the camera down, one hand on her hip. "Remember what I told you both, and you two," She eyes dart to Max and Dustin, "Two drinks maximum. If you choose vodka stick to vodka, understand?"

Max's eyebrows draw together, and looks at Joyce incredulously. "You're telling us we *can* drink?"

Dustin nods along to her statement . "Yeah. What?"

"You're almost adults and more than responsible. I trust you all enough and you're sleeping over after anyway. Now get out of here before the night is over." Joyce shoos them out of the house with a bit of laughter.

The situation is, at the same time, exactly what Will had imagined and so much worse. They stand side by side on the small front yard. He borrows his hands in his pocket to hide the annoyed twitch of his fingers.

"Uhm." Dustin says *eloquently* and Will just glances at him and watches him taking half a step closer before staring blankly.

Music is coming from inside and when someone opens the front door to step outside the most obnoxious song blares way louder than it should.

El frowns and with a resigned sigh takes a step forward; Will and Max half a step behind.

"It's okay. We'll take it slow." Max takes hold of Will's arm and tugs him toward.

Inside the house, the room is hot, the music is loud, humid and stank of sweat and cheap booze, with people dancing around, sprawled on the sofas or making out in various corners.

Too many people.

Way too many people.

He can deal with this, *maybe* . Nobody is paying them any mind, wrapped up in the lyrics and dancing and the alcohol they're drinking. The amount of people and their movement is enough to excuse Will's sweat sheened skin, and the anxiousness that vibrates in his bones as he holds into El's hand like she's his lifeline, bouncing around.

"I love this song!"

Dustin appears out of nowhere, clearly already intoxicated and barrelling into them. Max behind him, arms crossed, holding onto a

plastic red cup and sipping before scrunching up her nose in disgust.

Will lets the music hit his ears, the vocals of Paul Stanley ricocheting off of every wall, and he's transfixed on all his friends' beaming faces.

Tonight, I want to see it in your eyes

Feel the magic, there's something that drives me wild

And tonight, we're gonna make it all come true

'Cause girl, you were made for me

He turns on his heel once El has been refocused on Max and Dustin, now swooping in to dance and takes off towards what he hopes is the direction of the kitchen.

He needs a drink, and he needs one now.

Why is he here? He wants to be, literally, anywhere else. Will hates parties. So again, he asks himself:

Why am I here?

But here he is. Will Byers. In the middle of a high school party. Watching a bunch of drunk teenagers drink more alcohol, make out and grind on each other. He finds it abhorrent.

Immediately arriving in the kitchen there's about a hundred different alcohol bottles. Most all half-empty. Gin and beer and rum and vodka and whatever else, a big bowl of punch, probably spiked, most of which is spilled over the countertop. (*"What's the difference between gin and rum again?" He mutters to himself.*) He looks up when a familiar someone answers his question with: "No clue."

It's Lucas, dressed up as Han Solo. Grinning from ear to ear.

He looks Will up and down before quirking an eyebrow. *"Marty Mcfly, right?"*

Will smiles lopsided, tilted to the left and with a singular dimple in his left cheek. "Yeah."

"In my opinion it's not worth it."

He squints at him. "What?"

Lucas extends a hand towards the bottles and motions. "Drinking this shit." He pauses, turns his head around, looking throughout the room, then looks back at Will. " *Look at them.* All these people. They hate

each other but tonight- it's like it doesn't matter. Funny."

He wants Lucas to laugh. Wants Lucas to find the humor in the situation, wants him to smile and make some snarky comment, but when Will looks up at the boy from across the counter, he sees a stoic expression on his face.

Will hums his response in agreement.

They fall quiet, and Will takes in the view of crowded, cramped people; his cheeks red, as a result of the hot air in the room, the insistent thump of his heartbeat, and the current situation he's found himself in.

He tears his gaze away from the scene and takes a seat in the empty chair by the kitchen island, Lucas does the same next to him. Will's eyes are half lidded as he stares back up at him, silently.

Slowly, he lets out a deep breath, lets his eyes close, lets his head fall back as his heart pounds at a rate too fast to possibly be healthy.

"Will?" Lucas murmurs, just loud enough to get his attention. Will opens his eyes, and looks into the dark brown ones staring right at him. "Is there anything I can- *shit* . I don't know how to phrase this," He laughs nervously, ringing his fingers together. "I was stupid and I should have asked, y'know? I did.. but I should have kept asking until I got an answer about what the hell happened."

Will has a confused look in his eyes, but he nods nonetheless.

"We were all so close and," he falters, "I should have stuck by you guys, and I'm sorry. You had every right to not wanna talk to Mike after he.."

"I know," Will answers easily. "And, there's no hard feelings between us. You don't need to apologize."

He lets out a soft laugh. "That's reassuring." Lucas says slowly, but there's hesitation laced in his voice.

"You can sit with us at lunch... *if you want to* ."

"You'd let me into the party again, just like that?"

Will smiles at him. "You were always still in the party."

Max's words are distant and he feels sick and woozy all the sudden. It's like he's about to throw up, the bitter taste of bile rising in his throat, he tries not to wheeze as he sucks in a desperate breath, working to calm himself down.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Will chokes out, a lie between his teeth.

He wants to admit it's a lie, but of course, he can't because he's too stubborn and won't let himself.

That's what he says before he retches. Heart pounding, stomach churning and throat raw.

Eventually, Will relaxes, body melting against his. And Will knows he should hate it. He should stop it. Because it's all fake. But he doesn't stop it. No, Will does exactly the opposite. He let's Mike kiss him. Like an idiot.

Will's in a complete daze as he closes the trunk and leans on the side of his beat up tan pinto. The cigarette between his lips, he reaches inside the front jacket pocket for his lighter. He lights the cig, exhaling into the evening blue sky.

What makes someone fall in love? How does it happen? *Why* does it happen?

Is it the way Mike took his hand, and created a sense of protection? Was it his voice? His beauty? Was it countless dnd sessions and sharing little glances only they could decipher?

Was it his eyes, deep, alluring and deceptive? *I like you.* Loving and kind? *I just need to hear your voice.* Was it that? Was it the kiss?

Was it the way Mike always seemed to want him to be happy?

Was it his narcissism? His pride? Was it his sense of humor? Was it his smile? Was it the constant stupid arguments over nothing at all, playful fights, and laughs that went along with them? Was it that? Was it the *I love yous* or the friendly touches?

The way Mike never said anything even though they all knew that he wasn't just a 'late bloomer'? *Remember when everything seemed so easy?*

The way Mike would lash out at him? *I mean it's too fucking much, Will.*

Has he fallen out of love? Does he love Mike any less?

He doesn't. It hurts too bad.

Is that why he can't let go? Why can't he break out of this fog and escape his own head?

He can't shake this feeling, he can't escape the fog.

He isn't sure if he ever will.

"This calls for pizza." Joyce declares. "Is that okay for dinner? I don't feel like cooking tonight."

"Sure." Will says, shrugging.

"Alright!" Joyce claps her hands. "Let's go out instead of ordering in. And no, Ellie, we are not getting pineapple on it because that is an abomination."

"It's delicious!" El protests.

"I'm sorry, honey, but your opinion is wrong. Fruit does not belong on pizza."

"You're just-"

"Nope, we are not having this argument again." Will cuts her off by pinching her arm.

Will blinks drowsily, head nodding against his struggle to beat this pyramid thing that has been shuffling after him obnoxiously throughout this whole goddamn game - a game that Will had somehow miraculously purchased for Dustin a couple of years ago.

It's not like he's even enjoying this stupid game anymore with sleep creeping up on him. But really, the main reason he can't concentrate is the fact that Dustin is slumped against him, passed out cold with his head on Will's shoulder.

He sighs again and backs out of the game before shutting off the atari with the controller.

There's some hesitant shuffling, some genius maneuvering, and Will makes sure that Dustin won't flop over onto the floor before he stands.

Will blinks around the Henderson's living room into the sudden darkness, blind eyes fixed on the spot where Dustin was just leaning back against the couch while he waits for them to adjust. He takes this moment to reflect on the evening.

It's been quite a night - a freaking rollercoaster, if you ask him. After getting strung along by that cruel siren known as *hope* and feeling his heart completely shatter, they got high - Dustin apparently got it from one of his theater friends Will doesn't know - albeit short-lived... he's still a little confused about that. There was lots of laughing and lots of *feelings* , but it all ended on... well, kind of a low note.

If a meteor were to slam into the earth right now he would welcome the fiery embrace of death with open arms.

Another couple rapid blinks has him staring down at Dustin, resting

comfortably and breathing softly, evenly, propped up by the couch and his arms folded across his chest.

Will rubs at his eyes and tiptoes softly from the room. It's quiet in the house. Ms. Henderson is gone for the next two days for some convention on the other side of town, (he doesn't know what convention, he wasn't really listening when Dustin was talking.)

He's stealthy enough to make it over to his bag and dig out some pajama pants, a clean shirt, and his toothbrush without disturbing Dustin and then creeps into the bathroom to change.

He spits into the sink and rinses his brush before leaning forward to look at himself in the mirror. He forgoes the dramatic splash of cold water to his face - he did that earlier - and sniffs.

His chest hurts.

He quickly wipes away a tear and flicks off the light.

Will stirs.

It's warm - the sun on his face, its cordial, gossamer breath dancing along his lashes, ghosting over his skin and peering in beneath his eyelids gently.

The golden glow invites him, guiding him up through the soft tranquil depths with a sweet caress over his tear-damp cheeks, fluttering his wet lashes - sympathetic and sad, its whisper feathery.

No, he thinks, squeezing his eyes tighter in feeble defiance. *Not yet. Please... I'm not ready.*

Against his better judgement, he cracks his eyes.

Maybe whoever oversees his soul had a rough night.

And for that Will can't fault them.

If Will thinks about it, not much has changed over the years. Other than the loss of two (one) friends, the growing distance between him and his brother, and the worsening chill in his bones day after day.

His dad still calls sometimes. Usually months apart, to yell about how Will is a 'disgrace' to the family name, (like he even wants Lonnie's last name), to shout at his mother, or ask for money, they quite frankly don't have. Will tells her not to give it to him - they both know he's going to spend it on liquor - but she always does when she can, and the never ending cycle continues.

Everything is bleak in Hawkins. Weeks pass and the days start to feel

all the same.

He wakes up. He tries to eat. He throws it back up. He picks up his friends, occasionally rides in the Sinclair van, and drives to school. He eats in the bathroom stall sometimes when the voices are too loud.

Lucas begins to make an effort to hangout with them more often. But being on the school's debate team is like a full time job, so he barely has any time to spare between homework and practice matches.

Will goes to work and blows most of his money on cigarettes. Steve and Robin check in with him so much he's beginning to get irritated in a way he's never really been towards his friends.

He and El get into a fight one evening and haven't talked without being passive aggressive towards each other since. They distance themselves, if the other won't apologize they won't. They're too alike for their own good.

He paces around his room every night, thinking, he almost grabs his jacket and heads out the front door but doesn't.

At seventeen with only a couple of months left to go till his birthday, Will never thought this is how his life would be. This is so wildly different from anything he ever imagined.

The TV hasn't been fixed yet. They don't have the money.

He hasn't spoken to Nancy since he last saw her at Lucas's birthday party. He's starting to wonder just how long it's going to take for him to pick up a phone and call her.

He keeps some of his pills in a compartment in his car. El looks at him from the passenger's seat with, what he can only recognize as, pity in her eyes and he hates it.

Will Byers has good days.

He has days where he feels happy. His friends are with him, or sometimes they're not and it's just him at home. He laughs and smiles, or he doesn't, but he smiles on the inside. Everything goes well on the good days.

Will Byers has okay days, too, and those are more common, more frequent.

He has days where he's okay. He could be happy, or content, maybe somewhere in between. He can genuinely smile just fine on okay days.

Will Byers has bad days.

He has days where he is not happy, nor content, nor somewhere in

between. The bad days are the lowest of the low. He can't really smile, not comfortably. He stays in bed, skips school if he's able to. On the very worst of days he can't even talk. Bad days do not turn into okay days.

Today is a bad day. He senses it as soon as he wakes.

8. Overlapping Silhouette

Summary for the Chapter:

One day, he reminds himself, ignoring the sinking feeling in his stomach. There will be, one day, somewhere safe for him to land and take root, and when that day comes, he will jump, and hopefully feel fulfilled at the end of it all.

or:

Mike's life told in four parts.

One: September 1976 - December 1984.

Two: Spring 1985 - January 1986.

Three: January to September of 1986.

Four: January 1987 - Late October 1988.

Notes for the Chapter:

All songs mentioned:

[Fill Your Heart - Bowie](#)

[You're Too Possessive - Joan Jett](#)

[Heat Of The Moment - Asia](#)

I love Karen y'all, I'm doing her so dirty here and I honestly hate it. She's a great mom, I can't stress this enough!!

Alright so... what follows here was meant to be a silly little filler chapter but then I accidentally made it sort of important to the plot. Poor. Mike.

Here are the warnings: internalized homophobia. drowning/suffocation imagery. mentioned canon character deaths. self harm/mutilation. blood/gore. panic attacks. mentioned violence. underage drinking. underage sex/dubious consent (non graphic.) homophobic language. implied eating disorder. suicidal thoughts/idealization.

"Sometimes human connection isn't that complicated. Sometimes it's just about stepping back and asking the other person: *What do I mean to you? What do you see in me? Why do you think we landed here?*

Most people think love follows some triumphant storyline. You meet and you're in love and everything unfolds according to plan. But love is just two imperfect people, feeling their way in the dark together. Love is a calamity. You fall in love, and it turns out the person you're with is deeply flawed. You fall in love, and it turns out *you* are deeply flawed. You think that means nothing is magical anymore, but it really means that the magic has just begun.

This is not the end of a love story. This is the very beginning."

- Heather Havrilesky

One.

"Can I sit with you?" Mike asks the boy sitting on the swings all by himself. He's alone. From the second he saw him in class, Mike knew he wanted to be friends. By the way he smiled, the way he nervously answered the teacher's questions.

The boy looks at him. Then nods, allowing him to. Mike sits down on the swing beside him, hands gripping the cold metal that holds it up.

"I'm Mike."

"Mike." The boy repeats taking it in. "I'm Will."

"Will, do you wanna be my friend?"

"You wanna be my friend?"

Mike smiles at him, a big happy smile and nods, as if he already knows the answer, definitively. "Of course."

Will thinks for a moment then responds: "Yes."

"Did you have a good first day, honey?" His mother asks from the front seat. When he gets in the car, Nancy is pouting and kicks his leg. (*"Ow!" Mike yells. She responds with: "Shut up, baby."*)

"I made a friend."

"Oh, see, I told you if you introduced yourself you'd make one. Kindergarten isn't that scary, sweetie. What's their name?"

"Will." Mike beams. "And he's really nice, he invited me for dinner."

“That’s nice but I’ll have to speak with his mother first.”

Unlike the two boys, their mothers start off on a very bad note.

-

The first time Mike comes over he feels sick. Will’s dad is... bad. That’s one way to put it. He smells like alcohol and is always slurring his words around like he can’t form them properly. Mike likes to watch, and observe. Now he knows why Will’s mom kept on steering him away from the house for such a long time.

Will seems scared - so does Jonathan. They tense up when he comes into a room and hide things, like if he finds them he’ll take them away, or even worse throw them out. Jonathan tells him he’s sorry and Will looks at him with those sad eyes of his, and then returns to his sketch like everything’s normal.

It makes him appreciate that even though his father is basically not present at home, at least he doesn’t act like that.

-

"My dad... he left," Will says after a moment. He continues to stare at the floor, his voice and eyes dull. "Yesterday. He and my mom had a big fight. It was my fault. And I wanted them to stop fighting. I didn't

know how to make it better. I tried. I tried but I messed up. I messed up."

He starts crying, giant, ugly sobs that wrack his body. Guilt twists in Mike's chest. When he thought about wanting to be there for Will, he never imagined a situation like this. He doesn't know what to do or what to say. He can't fix this. He can't keep Will's parents together, his best friend is sobbing in the middle of his room, and Mike feels helpless.

He tries to think of what his mom does when he's crying. She strokes his hair and leaves sweet, tender kisses on his cheek. It doesn't make him stop crying, but it does help him feel loved and cared for. He can do that for Will.

Slowly, he lifts his hand, running his palm lightly over the back of Will's head. He starts kissing his cheeks, kissing away the tears.

"M-Mike?" His voice is small and confused.

"It's okay. You're okay," Mike murmurs against his flushed skin. It's what his mother always says. He continues stroking hair, peppering his face with tiny kisses.

He shifts closer, continuing to murmur the words over and over, hoping Will can, possibly, believe them.

"You're okay. You're gonna be okay."

Will presses his forehead firmly against Mike's, inhaling shakily.

"Just. Don't leave me, okay?" He says in quiet desperation, his eyes squeezed shut. "I can't lose you too."

Mike watches his face, the tightness of his features, the salty stains on his cheeks. "I won't," he promises.

I'll always be here for you.

It's not your fault.

He hopes Will comes to realize this.

-

They've just reached the pajamas part of the sleepover when Will asks Nancy something, too quietly for Mike to hear, and she glances over, biting her lip and shrugs.

Mike stays silent just wondering what they could possibly be talking about- Has she decided that she wants just *five minutes of peace, for goodness sake, just go to sleep already-*

"Will and I were wondering if you want to read a bedtime story?"

She holds it out just as Mike's about to ask if he can see the book. He wants to know who it's by and what else they have written and when it was written and what it's about and-

(He'll make himself stop, probably, after asking if he can see the book. He knows from experience that too many questions can make people look at him in that weary, eye-rolling way, as if just being himself is so much of a drain to them that talking to him makes them want to have a little lie down.

Will is the only person who never, ever looks at him like that, even if he can't answer all the questions. He's the only person who never makes him feel like there's too much of him.)

"We don't have to." Will looks a bit embarrassed and Mike realises that he thinks that perhaps he's not saying anything because he doesn't want to, so Nancy nods quickly, without even really looking at Mike, so that Will can look regular again.

"We can read," he replies.

Joyce reads too - to Will and Jonathan, every night, sometimes when Mike stays over as well, but this is different. Not just because they're not at Will's house (and so they're not all squashed up together on Joyce's bed, with Will in her lap so that he can see the pictures and Mike and Jonathan snuggled up close under her arm like baby birds under a wing.)

It's different because of course when Joyce reads, she's reading to all three of them and that means whatever she reads, it always has to be a soft, gentle book appropriate enough for two six year olds and one ten year old with pictures. They're always very, very easy books to read, so easy that they can be boring.

Nancy says that he shouldn't spoil the story, and lets him be a co-storyteller, reading the occasional page if he can do it sensibly (which means reading the actual words on the page, not making up his own.)

It's unfair, actually, because she reads stories to Mike sometimes in the daytime and he usually likes it when Nancy adds her own embellishments, as long as they're not too scary.

Sometimes when Mike is laughing over Nancy's addition to *Alice in Wonderland*, she'll add some parts about their mom forgetting where they parked or losing her purse or taking them to school late.

He's tried reading his own version of *Alice in Wonderland* to his mom once or twice, wanting to see if it would make her laugh too, but she'd had just smiled and nodded and *very-nice-darling'd* for two minutes and then said that Mike really should be reading more difficult books by now.

He complains about having to listen to Nancy read *Alice in Wonderland* for the millionth time but, he wonders, as he sits cross-legged in the pillow nest he and Will spent half of the evening constructing on his bedroom floor, if maybe he's gotten used to hearing stories like that.

The book Nancy is reading from now is more interesting, of course, things happen in it. The problem, Mike realises, is that for good things to happen in the story - good, interesting things - then you also have to have some not-so-good things happen too.

It's funny. Not *funny* . Just funny-peculiar. It's not a bad story, but it feels wrong for bedtime. Alice in Wonderland is *boring, boring, boring* by now.. but it's also safe. It's familiar. He knows it well enough to be able to chant along the words with Nancy without even looking at the page, and so he knows exactly what's going to happen: everything is small and safe and cozy, and by the end of the story, everything is wrapped up neatly.

This story though, is much more exciting - so exciting that after Nancy finishes the first chapter, he begs and pleads for another, because *how* can they leave it there?

Nancy says that it's getting late and that she's tired, she's nice about it, but Mike can tell from how Nancy looks at him and how Will looks a bit anxious that they both think she's just asking to push having to go to sleep back a bit.

And really, he likes that: he gives her that *yes* , he does just want to stay awake longer, because it's a sleepover and it's exciting and he does just want to hear more of the book because he much prefers exciting books like this rather than baby books.

He's excited, and he's happy and he's fine.

Will folds his arms, frowning. "Do you think anyone cared, Mike? Do you think anyone noticed?"

"I cared. I noticed."

Will shakes his head. "Go away." He finally says, bringing his knees to his chest.

"Not without you," Mike insists, "Do you want me to beat those kids up for you? Tell 'em off? Because I can! I'll go do that right now-"

"Don't. Don't say anything to them."

"Why not?"

Will doesn't respond. He simply retreats back into himself, returning to his primarily safe mechanism of ignoring everything around him until people leave him completely alone.

Mike doesn't leave. He takes another hesitant step forward, his voice sounds choked as he pleads. "Will, please. *Tell me what's wrong.*"

He doesn't immediately react. He simply observes, curious gaze analyzing him head to toe, trying to decipher whether the words he had spoken could be considered trustworthy.

"I could tell you but I know the world you see and the world I see are different. That you don't live your life the same way I do."

"Why would you even..." Will starts, dabbing the blood away from Mike's chin, holding his face with his other hand so he won't flinch away. "I told you to leave it alone. You never listen to me." He grumbles and cleans the wound with antiseptic.

Touching his lip, Mike winces.

"Well, at least I look like a badass now."

-

"I want you guys to meet someone," Will starts, looking to Lucas and Mike, "He's in my class and he just moved here from Michigan so he doesn't have any friends and I thought - maybe - he could sit with us."

The boy behind Will smiles large, before extending a hand for them to shake, "I'm Dustin Henderson... *May I join you?*"

Mike sits back in contemplation, letting the idea sit for a second. "I don't really care either way," he says with a shrug of his shoulders, nonchalance and cool indifference coloring his body.

"You sure?" Dustin raises a brow.

"Don't pay attention to him," Lucas answers for him, rolling his eyes, "He just sucks when it comes to change. You can sit with us."

-

Mike first tells Will that he loves him when they're nine and ten, huddled together in a blanket fort in the basement that's destined to collapse by morning.

This is something practiced. The extra sheets are in the closet in the hall. He takes the pillows from downstairs, the blankets from upstairs. Then they both wiggle between the layers until their bodies are met from toes to hips to shoulders to hands.

They stay like that for hours most days, pressed tight as if they could melt into one human being. Breaths synced, pulses steady, postures mirrored.

There isn't much stress when they're like this. It's *MikeandWill*

against the world, a two headed monster that wants nothing more than to seek silence and revel in the way it's twin lungs inhale on their own rhythm. There are no fighters or fantasy monsters trying to slay them. Just their own little castle to keep them warm and safe.

He watches Will like a lifeline.

For Mike, it's memorizing something he already knows. They've been best friends for four, almost five years. He doesn't want to lose him. Things change so fast and people change faster. Mike doesn't know what he would do if Will changed while he wasn't looking. He doesn't know what to do if one day he turned around and Will was looking back at him. He doesn't know what he would do if one day Will saw him and left. Mike needs him.

He's not sure how to explain to Will that he's become more than just a best friend to him. He's become a constant, an anchor, a north star. He's a cool breeze on a hot summer's day. He's a warm blanket when the snow piles up outside on the streets. When he's near, Mike doesn't worry about what others think when they see him. He doesn't care about what they might whisper behind his back.

With Will, he doesn't feel like anything's wrong with him. He feels normal. He feels safe.

"Goodnight," the words come out melted by safety and comfort, *"I love you."*

-

Their graduation from elementary school is quiet. Mike stands for a stifled picture outside the school gate with his parents on both sides, hands wrapped around his backpack straps and not a trace of a smile found on his face. There are pictures with the party too, and it's far from stifled.

“People are gonna think you’re Jonathan with your bangs all saggy like that, and your eyes are all like, ‘I’m going to eat you in your sleep.’ ”

“So I can remember my brother, Jonathan,” Will sniffles as he tacks the picture up on his wall, pretending to cry. “He’s not dead, he just never comes out of his room anymore.”

-

Mike doesn't think he ever believed in soulmates.

The idea that the universe could come up with one singular person who is perfect for him sounds so impossible; isn't a person supposed to decide their own fate? What if he doesn't like his soulmate? What if they don't like him? He doesn't want to dwell on that thought. All his life, he's heard people talk about the wonders of having a soulmate, but he can't calm the anxiety that perhaps it wouldn't turn out like such a fairytale for him. It certainly hadn't for his parents.

That isn't Mike's only problem with the idea of the soulmate strings, however. His true qualm with them lay in their sadistic nature. He doesn't want to be connected to someone, and *need* them to live.

These thoughts are playing on a loop in his head as he stares at himself in the bathroom mirror.

He looks at himself in the mirror, taking in a deep breath. “What will

be, will be.”

He wants to believe that.

-

"Don't talk back. Your father thinks that game you play is demonic."

"He's wrong."

"I'm starting to think he's right."

"He's just being mean."

His mother responds with, *"No. He isn't being mean, Michael. You have to protect yourself from the sins of this world. Vampires, witches, and all those disgusting monsters."*

"They aren't disgusting."

"They're evil. It's tainting your mind."

-

“I’m touched, Will,” He says, voice just a little bit too thick. “So touched to be the chosen one.”

“I didn’t choose you, you just wouldn’t leave me alone.”

“Wow, harsh.” But he’s laughing, the sound grows soft with affection.

-

They’re eleven years old back from a bike ride, huddled together in Will’s bedroom. Tired from biking, they sit peacefully in silence until Will speaks up, resting his head in the crook of Mike’s neck.

“Hey. Do you think you’ll ever want to get married?” He asks, gazing out the window.

Mike looks over at his best friend, a boy with more light than a sky full of stars. Thinking that Will is the only person Mike would want to marry, he says:

“I don’t know... Maybe someday.”

-

They found Will’s body. Bloated, cold, blue and purple, and so

disgustingly un-Will like. That thing isn't his Will - his Will smelled like citrus soap, sweet almond shampoo, and second-hand smoke. His Will smiled big and bright and happy. His Will hummed songs he and Jonathan listened to that Mike didn't know under his breath as he drew. His Will laughed at his corny jokes, patched him up when he got hurt from doing something stupid, and gave him his favorite drawings to decorate his room and basement.

His Will was alive. He was real.

Except he isn't.

"Mike."

"Mike? Mike, what?" He slaps Eleven's arm off of him. "You said he was alive. You lied. Why did you lie? What's wrong with you? What is wrong with you?"

"Mike," El manages to get out.

"What?"

"Mike, come on," Lucas pleads through tears. "Don't do this, man."

"Mike!" Dustin yells out as he hops on his bike and pedals away, already sobbing.

-

"Hey, it's me." He says, knocking on Will's open door to alert him - it's just him. No demogorgon. "Can I-" Before he can finish his sentence Will cuts him off. "Come in."

When Mike enters he sees Will laying down, clutching onto a pillow, a huge - utterly huge, amount of blankets wrapped around him. Will sniffles, and Mike can tell he's just been crying. The tears staining the white pillow he has his head on. Will quickly wipes his tears away out of embarrassment, and arises as Mike settles on the opposite side of the bed, taking off his backpack.

"I brought your homework."

"T-Thanks."

"Yeah. It's just boring, useless math." He sighs. "At least you don't have to go to school now, well, for now," Mike tries to put a positive spin on it. "That's a good thing right?"

Will nods, solemnly.

"I... I should let you-" He stumbles on his words as he gets up from the bed, putting the backpack back on his shoulders.

"Yeah. Bye, Mike. And thanks, really."

As Mike goes to grab the door handle, he says one last, "Bye, Will," he's stopped by Will's soft voice and tone.

"Can you stay?"

-

"I know you miss her. El? She sounded awesome." Will looks at Mike before dropping his gaze back to the scattered notes all over the basement table.

Mike nods, sadly from across the table, fidgeting in his chair. "She was."

"Do you love her?"

"I don't know," Mike responds, jotting something down with his messy chicken-scratch handwriting. "Maybe?" Then he looks up at Will, "Maybe I do. I kissed her and everything."

"You kissed her?"

"Yeah. I promised I would take her to the Snowball."

No, no, no, Mike thinks. Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.

Will can clearly see him getting emotional, and just like Will always

is, he's caring. Sympathetic. He gets out of his seat and hugs Mike. And in that hug, Mike feels a little better as he sobs out all his grief.

-

Use your common sense.

Don't play dumb.

Don't pretend to be stupid.

Don't talk back.

Don't walk away from me.

Look at me when I'm talking to you.

Is that sarcasm?

You have an attitude problem.

What do you have to cry about?

-

"Will!" Mike shouts out, supercomm in hand, his converse scuffing up underneath the grass. Will is standing on the field, eyes closed. When Mike finally gets to him he shakes him, trying to get him to wake from his stupor, but nothing works.

Joyce, Dustin, Lucas and Max come hot in pursuit. Joyce covering her hand up to her mouth up in worry and shock. "What happened?"

"I don't know!" Mike exclaims. "I found him like this."

-

"You said yes and it was the best thing I've ever done."

As if it's something out of a fairy tale - he sees a red string on his wrist, connecting to the boy in front of him.

It would be a lie if he said the first thought that came into mind wasn't '*shit.*'

-

"Do you wanna dance?" Mike asks the girl in front of him. Eleven. El.

Jane. After all this time, she's finally here. Finally safe. By her look you wouldn't think of all the things she'd gone through in her lifetime, you'd think she was a totally normal thirteen year old girl.

She looks around nervously and then back at him, "I don't know how."

"Me neither... Maybe we could learn together."

And when they begin slow dancing, all Mike can do is look at Will and that girl. He doesn't know why he's so focused on Will in that moment instead of Eleven. Instead of the girl he's dancing with. Instead of the girl he thought he was in love with. *353 days*. When it came down to it, the time Mike thought Will was gone, and all the times in between when Mike thought something had happened to him was worse than the 353 days.

Because Mike's eyes aren't on Eleven who he's dancing with - they're on Will, with that girl.

"Some people never go crazy. What truly horrible lives they must lead."

- Charles Bukowski

Two.

There is a hand in Mike's, nimble artist fingers laced with his, comfortable, familiar, and warm as his heart beats in his chest.

He gets to feel safe. Secure. Loved. There is another body pressed to his side, lips that curl into a soft smile, cool laughter and hands that push back his hair, easy as anything. He knows that voice, he's known it for years, softer than anything else that's ever been a part of Mike's life, that murmurs jokes that are equal parts stupid and hilarious.

-

He loves Will.

This, to Mike, is a certainty. His love for Will isn't a thing he ever questions. As soon as he'd understood the word with its multifaceted meanings, he'd known that was what he felt. There's never any wavering in that. He loves Will. The sky is blue. A fall from the cliff into the lake can kill you. Nancy and Holly are his sisters. Lucas, Dustin, Max and El are his best friends. Eyes are for seeing, ears are for hearing. He loves Will.

Spring arrives fast.

It's like music being cranked up to full volume, the sky blazing blue and the sun yellow, free and bright. The trees rise to the occasion, verdant hues, and everywhere there are flowers, acting as scattered sprinkles.

The flowers are their own masterpieces, changing the scenery, the warmth of the land that give thanks to the warmth of the sun.

Each day of these months will come in special moments. And that's what they're doing now; making moments to remember.

They're outside of Castle Byers, the trees' canopies offering shade from the blaze of the sun. Bees hovered over the wildflowers, buzzing around and serving as nature's music.

Mike can close his eyes and feel as though the floral blooms are within him, just as much as they are around him.

For the first time, in a very long time, Mike feels calm. Just being here with Will brings his soul into sweet surrender, vibrant, yet so very relaxed. Every fragrance is fresh, like the pages of a new book. Each burst of a birdsong is unique, a chorus to waken the mind, and to shake off whatever drowsiness remains. Thoughts wander, lungs fill with fresh air, and time rolls by in its silent, endless way.

It's a feeling Mike savors, as he didn't get to experience much of it for a long while - but now they are at peace.

After months, they're finally safe.

Flowers are interesting, there are so many, some pretty and some

ugly, that all have their own color and name. Some as simple as a tulip and some full of emotion, like orchid's or hydrangeas.

Soft yellow dandelion petals brush down the length of Will's nose, and eyes still closed, he scrunches his face up.

“Quit it,” Will bats at Mike's hand and shifts, trying to get comfortable again, using his thigh as a pillow. The gentle tugging on Will's hair tells him that he has woven another dandelion into the strands to join its friends.

“I’m gonna look like an elf when you get done here,” he murmurs, rolling his head to the side to crack one eye open at Mike.

The dandelions in his hair move with him, and Mike's hands are busy again, working on weaving a flower crown.

“How’d you learn to make these, anyway?” Will asks, bringing one hand up to absentmindedly tangle his fingers with Mike's hoodie string.

He shrugs. But he feels pinpricks of warmth building in his chest. The words rise up faster than he expects, laced with soft honey, “Me and Nance saw them in a movie a few years ago and she wanted one. So I learned.”

“Hm. A man of many talents,” Will teases, tipping his head back to look up at him.

-

Click.

“...And here we have William Jacob Byers, in the kitchen, exercising a surprising degree of culinary skill-”

“Mike, stop fooling around with the camera and help me.”

“Fooling around,” Mike repeats, as he stares into the camera lens with the most hurt expression he can muster. “He says I’m fooling around, like I’m not documenting the fine art of cooking.”

“Come here and help me, *for once* . I need the food ready by the time my mom and Jonathan get home.”

“Is this how you treat all your guests, or is it just me?”

There’s a clatter as he speaks, the scene abruptly changes to the kitchen counter, a thin wooden chopping board and a knife that halts. There’s a scuffle, the camera jolts, and the screen abruptly blacks out, the only sound is Will shouting,

“Stop recording me!”

-

“Wait - you’re leaving already?” Mike asks, helplessly eyeing Will putting on his jacket.

“My mom wants me home for dinner.” Will glances back up as he buttons his jacket, noticing Mike's sullenness. He gives a small smile and looks down again. “I’ll come by later. Leave your window open.”

“Okay,” Mike says, running his tongue hard against his teeth, desperately trying to keep his smile casual.

A hand in his, a sunny bright, clearly hushed laugh. Mike makes a joke he knows is lame, but lips still curl into an amused smile, and this is the relationship he wants. Someone who looks at him with stars in his eyes, and spreads warmth all the way to his fingertips.

A voice whispers his name. He murmurs one back.

In the morning, he doesn’t remember what *it* is. He never does. It didn’t bother him before, but it’s starting to.

If he wants one thing, it’s this.

-

"Hey, Mike," Will says nervously, leaning up against the lockers behind him as he clutches onto his backpack straps. "Do you wanna maybe have a sleepover tonight? I don't know like old times? It's at Dustin's. Lucas and Max are coming too but- I mean, it's fine if you don't want to. I.. I get it. It's just-"

Mike has done his hardest to avoid Will at all costs, it did hurt their friendship quite a bit but he can't risk it. Those weird feelings that bubble up in his stomach, and is evidently clear in the way he looks at Will. Anywho, he's with El now, and has been for a while, and he's happy.

Yeah, happy, Mike thinks to himself.

Although he realizes, most likely, he can't rid himself of this disease - he's gonna be stuck like this the rest of his life. Will is his soulmate. Yet, he decides to ignore that ringing reminder in his head, and continue on.

He slams his locker shut, making Will jump at the sound, and grimaces. "I actually promised El I'd help her study tonight. Y'know, the flashcards Hopper makes her do."

"Oh." Will's face falls flat. "Okay," He backs up, "I'll see you later then."

-

It's weird, being this honest with Will again. Like all the time he spent acting like a dick to make it seem like he didn't care was a waste of time and he should have just done this from the beginning.

A few seconds pass where Mike is unable to remain in control. He meets Will's worried eyes and feels incredibly vulnerable. It's as if Will can see every last bit of his soul just by looking into his eyes. He knows he looks as lost and insecure as he feels and still he can't bring himself to put a stop to it.

Which, when he thinks about it, is probably what Will intended.

Will's hands are cupping his face now, and he looks wrecked. His eyes are red and puffy, his hair is a complete mess and he doesn't stop staring.

It's too much again and he looks away, but Will tightens his hold around his face and forces him to look back up.

"Stop," Mike whispers and removes Will's hands with his face. "It's too much."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's too fucking much, Will!" Mike's voice raises towards the

end of the sentence and he has to take a breath to calm down again.
“I can’t handle this.”

“What? What can’t you handle?”

Mike is already walking towards the front door, except Will beats him there, blocking his way out by putting his hand on the knob.

“If you want to leave, I won’t stop you.”

He scoffs.

“But you clearly have some kind of problem with me, and I think now is a good time to talk about it. Unless you want to go back to ignoring me like you have been for the last couple of months.”

Wow, okay . Mike didn’t expect that. Will really isn’t the type to call people out and it’s kind of a shock.

He can feel the guilt now, rising, deep in the pit of his stomach. He never wanted to be confronted with this. Or maybe he did? Maybe part of the reason he still holds so much anger is that he deep down wishes he had confronted him sooner.

“I know this is weird, okay? And I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable. Or if I did something. I tried to treat you like I would anyone else, but it’s hard. Because you’re not anyone else to me, you

never were, you know that.”

Mike loses his train of thought completely.

“I mean, we were friends - *we are friends*. I know you and- but then we just stopped? Or you stopped,” he actually points at Mike, with emphasis on the ‘*you*.’ “And then we just didn’t talk anymore and I-” Will looks like he just aborted a rant that could have gone on for a while and that he’s clearly getting worked up about. “What I’m saying is I know it’s weird,” he continues after a long breath, “And I’ve tried to make it not weird, trust me, but it’s not working because no matter what I do, or how I treat you, you still act like I ran over your cat.”

If there was ever any doubt about whether Will cared about Mike not speaking to him, or barely sparring any attention whatsoever to their friendship, it’s gone now. He’s obviously angry about it. He just hides it way better than Mike does.

“Because you’re not anyone else to me, you never were, you know that.”

“I don’t have a cat.”

It’s absurd, but that’s what comes out of his mouth. And for a moment it’s like he’s watching himself and this moment from outside of his body. He’d laugh if Will didn’t look so disappointed with his reply.

"Not the point. I know, sorry." Mike shakes his head in an attempt to clear it. It works, but just a little. It's easier to concentrate when he's not looking at Will. "I just- I don't think I can have this conversation with you. At least not right now."

"That's fine," The way he jerks back reminds Mike of a scared child, one ready to be hurt once again over false promises, "We don't have to."

-

He doesn't like holding hands with his girlfriend. He doesn't like kissing his girlfriend. He doesn't like being with his girlfriend.

Her chapstick spread all over his lips just feels wrong, and her hands are uncomfortably dainty and soft. Mike wonders if dating is supposed to make him feel like an outsider, like he's doing something entirely sickening every time they do something even remotely coupley.

It just feels all wrong.

-

"Where's Dustin right now?" Will says bitterly, arms flailing in the air to drive his point home. "You don't know and you don't care. And he doesn't either and I don't blame him. You're ruining the party! And for what? So you can swap spit with some stupid girl?"

"El's not a stupid! It's not my fault you don't like girls!"

As he looks at Will, complete and utter shock passes through both their faces. He said it. But the more he thinks about it, who are those words really meant for?

Mike knows the things people say about him are cruel, and he could give a damn, but now Mike made it seem like he hated him. He had his thoughts about Will being queer, he's never had a girlfriend and as far as Mike knows he didn't exactly like that girl kissing him at the Snowball. He never says anything though, he's too afraid to ask. That'd just put *everything* out there. That's too risky, even for him.

It's one of those things the party never mentions. It's like a rule by now, an unspoken saying of : *'We know already and we don't care but we won't bring it up unless you do.'*

"I'm not trying to be a jerk alright?" *Wow. Great save. Jesus, you're acting like a jerk.* "We're not kids anymore. *(I wish we were)* I mean - what did you think, really? We were never gonna get girlfriends, *(I wish we didn't have to)*, we were gonna stay in my basement and play games for the rest of our lives?"

As much as it pains Mike to admit it, that's what he wants.

Will is in near tears as he says, "I guess I did. I really did."

-

"You're mad." Mike says quietly, testing the waters.

"I'm not."

"You are. You're totally pissed." Despite everything, he huffs out a laugh. "You were giving me the silent treatment a few seconds go."

"I'm not giving you the silent treatment."

Mike catches up to him, walking by his side, "Well, yeah, not now you're not, since I pointed it out."

Will glares at him from the corner of his eyes. He can see the confusion, disbelief and impatience fester inside of Will until it's released in the form of annoyance. He glowers up at him. "Stop beating around the bush. I know you hate me."

-

Mike looks up from the metal floor of the van and sees Will, Lucas, Jonathan and Nancy standing side by side.

Lucas looks around before glancing at Max, who is sharing a shock blanket with both Robin and El. Steve sitting beside Mike. "Billy. He's-"

"Dead," she says, voice wavering on each word, twirling what Mike recognizes as her late step brother's necklace between two fingers, "Billy's dead."

In the next hour Mike is overwhelmed by many things.

Nancy wraps him up in a tight hug, both part relieved and part worried. Jonathan blanks and sits down in the van, staring at all the soldiers. Will does the same next to him. Joyce comes back with no Hopper and tells a broken Eleven that her adoptive father is dead. Lucas has to explain to the officials that his sister and friend are still on the hill, by themselves. Steve passes out. Robin yells for someone to get him to a hospital. Max refuses to get up, and somehow, somehow, he finds himself in the back of Nancy's car with the entire Byers family plus El.

Eleven chokes out, the tears falling down the slope of her cheeks, "What's gonna happen to me?"

After some time Will reaches over and places a hand on hers, despite, practically, stranger status, "It's gonna be okay."

Mike sniffles and a tear falls for Hopper.

Thank you, he thinks.

-

I know I'm not the villain.

I'm not a hero either.

I'm the person that watches worlds rise and return to ashes.

I'm the person that would bleed to death for my friends family.

I'm the person that saw everything and nothing.

I'm the person that dies at the end.

The one that remembers.

An unlucky participant in it all.

I watched many like you, come to their end.

You didn't deserve it.

Nobody will tell your story.

But I'll tell yours.

I told the stars about the beginning of your journey.

-

"I missed you," Will speaks, muffled by fabric.

"Yeah. Missed you, too."

The two weeks when Ms. Byers was deciding whether or not to sell the house was the most nerve wracking and anxiety inducing of his life. Joyce said she couldn't do it to them - she couldn't take them away from their friends, especially with everything they've gone through.

"No." He looks up. "*I missed you,*" he says, his breath on Mike's neck.

Mike feels heat rise up his chest. He must be red in the face.

What the hell.

-

Will emerges from the shower with nothing but a pair of gym shorts and a towel slung over his shoulders, and Mike almost gets a heart attack.

Which is stupid.

He's seen Will shirtless countless of times over their years of

friendship, but that doesn't change the way his heart rate immediately accelerates the moment Will steps into his room, hair still damp and hip bones jutting out from underneath the hem of his pants and-

"I'm gonna take a shower too." Mike chokes out, grabbing his towel and a change of clothes, before sliding into the bathroom and slamming the door shut behind him.

"Okay," he says, "You can do this."

He has his hands braced on the sink in front of him, trying to stare down his own reflection in the mirror. All he does is manage to look mildly queasy.

"Whatever the hell this is," he soldiers on, "It's going to go away. It's just... Stockholm syndrome. Or something."

Yeah. That's probably what it is.

Stupid brain. Stupid, stupid brain.

He sucks in a breath, and splashes water onto his face.

He can do this. He can do this. He can do this.

It's like someone flipped a switch somewhere inside of Mike, and he's been hit by the crushing realization that *hey, you're into dudes. Your best friend is a guy, and your soulmate, and he also happens to be really incredibly attractive, if you haven't realized it yet, and oh boy, you're really fucking screwed, aren't you, Mike?*

So now he's frowning and squirting too much shampoo into his hand, scowling at the over-abundance of suds running down his face as he lathers up his hair, hissing at the burn of the soap in his eyes, and the *plop plop* noise of the foam against the ceramic is oddly annoying because when soap is in your eyes every sensation is a million degrees of awful. His feet are sliding around the bottom of the tub while he struggles to find a washcloth that isn't there, and maybe it would be a good thing to slip and bash his head on the tub because then he would be dead and he wouldn't have to deal with...

What if he noticed? It doesn't mean anything! This doesn't mean anything.

Blinking away, and suppressing the urge to slam his head into something solid, Mike mindlessly rinses the shampoo from his hair and scrubs himself clean, ridding himself of sweat and hopefully some of the shame that goes along with it.

This isn't weird. HE'S WEIRD. He's the weird one here.

He knocks his head against the tile wall and closes his eyes, standing there and trying to relax under the warm stream but he's too amped up, too fidgety.

He wonders if he can hang himself with the shower curtain.

He quickly comes to realize that his shower has become less of a means for getting clean and more of a damp pity party.

Mike mentally punches himself in the face and grabs a towel to wrap around his waist.

He smears the fog from the glass and pouts at himself in the mirror before he pulls his palms down his face and smacks them against the sink, leaning in to inspect his reflection.

His cheeks are rosy, pinked like he got slapped on both sides.

He sort of feels like he has.

But he isn't exactly feeling guilty about anything. Not *guilty guilty* , anyway.

Conflicted.

Yeah, sure. That's it. He's feeling *conflicted*.

Will's hair is messy, and his pale skin is a little flushed from the hot shower. The shirt he's wearing hangs crookedly on his slender frame, draping over his shoulders to reveal sharp collarbones and a smattering of birthmarks that almost perfectly line up with the constellation of Cassiopeia.

Mike wonders if Will can feel just how fast his pulse is racing under his skin. Somewhere along the line, between sleepovers and secrets murmured under the safe cover of nighttime and blankets, racing on their bikes, between all the teasing and the scraped knees and bruised elbows, he's gone and given away his whole heart without meaning to, without really even realizing it.

He's realizing that it scares him more than he liked to admit.

-

This is fine. Of course it's fine.

It's not fine.

He whines and buries his face into the pillow.

Conflicted.

So it's scary. He's scared. There is no safety net if he takes a leap. If there ever is one.

Mike begins to fall asleep, slipping beneath the murky darkness just as one last memory curls around in his skull like a wisp of smoke, following him down into the haze of a troubled doze.

And *holy shit* , those softer-than-humanly-possible lips are parting beneath his own and suddenly they are sharing air and Mike

doesn't know the first thing about kissing despite many makeout sessions with El, and he's gripping his hair and pressing against him-

Mike's eyes fly open.

Oh come on, drama queen. Like that's the first time you've ever thought about that.

He's right. That is not the first time he's thought about it.

But that is where it stops. It never escalates any further than innocent kissing, but now he's burning up for reasons other than the summer heat with a very obvious problem pressing into the mattress.

He throws an arm dramatically over his eyes.

And now he feels empty.

He always feels empty after.

Okay, yeah. He's lying about that, too.

And this, he knows. This will be just another endless night; wishing he could sleep instead of reliving every meaningless sideways glance and brush of fingertips that hold far too much significance in those moments.

Now, he knows that he's going to tell himself that tomorrow will be different; maybe tomorrow he will figure something out or maybe Mike'll finally give Will a reason to hate him, or perhaps these feelings will just stop on their own.

Or maybe just... something else.

Anything else.

For the love of god please let tomorrow bring something else.

He would *kill* to be distracted.

But he isn't.

And every night is the same thing.

He can't even remember what it was like before this *thing* took root in his chest.

It isn't just Will's soft hands; it's not his face, which he now finds

maddeningly handsome.

It's the way he carries himself, those little glances that Mike catches that are only meant for him, the way Will still hasn't found a non-awkward way of saying goodbye when they part ways. It's the way he curls into himself when he sleeps and the way he tells Mike he hates him with absolutely no malice in his tone.

This is a *first* . This *admission* . This *awareness* of himself. This *change* in his routine.

He shuts his eyes, because maybe if he hopes hard enough this epiphany of his will fizzle out and die.

-

In a metaphysical sense of the word, Mike does not have a home.

He has a house he goes back to everyday, and sleeps in, a place he's spent more of his life than any other, a roof over his head whenever he's in need of one and he's aware that it's more than some people have - it's more than most people have, but it's not really a home.

Like most things in his life, this is no one's fault but his own.

One day, he reminds himself, ignoring the sinking feeling in his stomach. There will be, one day, somewhere safe for him to land and take root, and when that day comes, he will jump, and hopefully feel fulfilled at the end of it all.

-

"*An early frost,*" Robin repeats once again, looking up from the counter.

Mike frowns, brain telling him to feel shame but pumping heart furiously opposing it. "Am I not allowed to watch it?" he whispers sourly, not sure whether he wants Robin to hear it or not.

She looks at him, indifferent to the situation. "Never said that.. it's- *Did you read the back?*"

"*Yeah?* Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all. Definitely not with me." She suddenly pipes up, appearing amused.

"What do you mean?"

Her expression changes and she purses her lips, looking away from him. "I suggest watching it alone, and be prepared to cry, *mini-Wheeler* . It's heavy shit."

-

“Do you remember when we used to sneak onto your roof as kids?”
Will asks, voice soft.

They'd spent countless nights on Mike's roof (always Mike's. It's flat, and therefore not nearly as dangerous as Will's would have been.) Will always talked about the stars; the chemistry behind how they formed, his favourite constellations, and every dorky thing in between.

In the confines of the four-walls around them, Mike is perfectly content to stay in their own little universe, created just for the two of them.

Mike wakes slowly, his movements sluggish. The air is hot, as you expect it would be in early august, seeping through the small spaces in the window frame. He blinks, once, twice, then rubs at his eyes with his hands. The air skates down his back, skimming the bare skin where his shirt rode up somewhere in the night. He whines and pulls off one of the blankets, tucking it behind him. The bed isn't empty, and he curls closer to the warm body. The body beside him tenses unconsciously, bowing away from Mike's touch.

He's fully awake now and more than content to lay in the comfortable silence. He can hear the clock on the wall in the Byers' living room tick with every passing second.

He assumes everyone else in the house is asleep, Jonathan in his room with the door shut, and Joyce and El sleeping soundly in their

(temporarily) shared room.

There's a groan from beside him, a shifting of positions, a face pressing between pillows, and then silence as he slips back into sleep.

It's only a short time before Will wakes, eyes still half closed as he sits up and uses both hands to push hair from his face. He shivers despite the hot air, then climbs over Mike's legs to stumble to the bathroom. There's a thud in the hall as he bumps into a wall. Will's always been pretty clumsy, even without sleep hindering his movements. The bathroom door closes, then opens less than five minutes later. There's no running into walls as he returns and stands in the doorway for a moment, lips curling in the hint of a smile when his eyes meet Mike's.

It's a rare smile, one of genuine happiness. It might easily be one of Mike's favorites, second only to when he laughs.

Will crawls over him, and he halts the progress with a hand on his cheek. His brows furrow in confusion and the smile disappears. Mike presses a quick kiss to his forehead. The smile quickly returns as Will sinks into the mattress and throws a leg over his, replacing the pillow with laying his head on Mike's chest instead. Mike doesn't mind.

Sleep takes Will, once again, quickly and quietly.

Mike daydreams, bits of memories tangling with scenarios of his imagination.

-

“I, uh...” Will stammers, “Made you a mixtape. It’s stupid. I know, but-”

“You what?” Mike squeaks, his voice a few octaves higher than usual.

“I think you might like some of the stuff on here. I mean, you’ve been talking about it a lot when we hang out and I..” Will abandons his sentence and moves across the room, reaches to place the mixtape in the cassette player and turns it on.

Fill your heart with love today

Don't play the game of time

Things that happened in the past

Only happened in your mind

Their faces are so tantalisingly close, and Mike can see the lights reflecting in Will's eyes, causing them to shimmer in that mesmerizing way.

For a second, he gazes deep into Will's light eyes, watching the

reflections in them glimmer and waver with every tiny movement he makes.

Just remember

Lovers never lose

'Cause they are free of thoughts unpure

And of thoughts unkind

“Is it too much?” he whispers.

Mike shakes his head. “No, it’s... perfect.”

Mike's thoughts leap to what he wants to do with Will - to hold him tight, for them to fall asleep in each other's arms, for him to be able to feel every beat of Will's heart as they embrace - and then, instantly, he realizes that all of this is no longer just some stupid teenage puppy love.

He's *in love* with Will.

Like, actually, *in love* with him.

God help him.

Because shit is going to hurt.

-

The mixtape is exactly an hour and six minutes long. By Mike's calculations, he's played it for a least a day and a half since Will gave it to him a week ago.

He loops it over and over, because the scary thing is, once he turns it off? He's gonna have to do something about it.

And that's fucking terrifying.

He doesn't really know what to do now. The tape is still playing but he's going to have to turn it off in a few minutes when he gets to the video store, and Will's probably going to be there, and Mike's hands are suddenly shaking and he nearly crashes his bike into the nearest bush.

-

The sun is scorching and somehow it hasn't rained in weeks. It's summer - the sky is clear, blue, and cloudless, and the six of them are

sprawled out in the tall, uncut weeds and grass by the lake in just their bathing suits and swimming trunks.

To Mike's right, lies Max with her arms and legs spread out with no regard for anyone else's personal space. Next to Mike, Dustin and El, sleeping on their stomachs. To Mike's left, there's Lucas looking completely nonchalant behind a pair of sunglasses, leg crossed over the other at the knee, kicking his foot to an unknown rhythm. Will, lying on his back with a towel rolled up neatly under his neck like a makeshift pillow. The few hours of sun have already streaked his brown hair with gold and brought out a spattering of freckles over his shoulders and nose.

"You're staring," Will says without even looking at him, and there is just something about the way he brushes his hair off of his forehead. The curve of his wrist, the graceful movement, the way his fingers trail back down over his sweat-slicked neck.

Mike only hums in response and kicks his foot.

It seems this is the view of Will he sees most often lately. He's becoming increasingly familiar with the way Will's shoulders tense up. He supposes if Will is this uninterested he should simply leave him be, but Mike's unrelenting nature won't allow him to stop until Will finally tells him to stop.

"*You need to stop,*" Max mumbles, sitting up and pulling a dandelion that's gone to seed out of her wild red hair. He thought Max was asleep this whole time, not that he really gives a shit anyway.

“Stop what?”

“Stop fucking with Will. Pick on someone else, *alright?*”

“Like you?” he smirks.

“You're such a dick.”

And it's so fucking typical of Mike to fall for his best friend. Of course it happened this way. He almost wonders if he's forcing it on purpose to piss off his parents to the fullest extent, but then he looks at Will, sees that smile on his face, hears that laugh, and he knows, *he knows*, it's not all bullshit.

-

The opening of *You're Too Possessive* blares in Mike's ears as he falls onto the sofa in the Byers' living room between Jonathan and Lucas, a cup in his hand, liquid sloshing. His eyes move from his sister and Steve conversing in the kitchen, Robin sitting back in a chair by the table indulging Dustin, and Will, a leg dangling off the arm of the club chair. Ironically this was all Joyce's idea, of course she had no idea about the alcohol, *but* Steve Harrington is a wild card.

Mike has absolutely no idea how he drank as much as he did, but in all honesty, he doesn't care too much anymore. At some point, El pulls Max up to dance with her, hands find their way onto Max's shoulders where they lay loosely, matching the larger than life grin on her face.

Will starts singing along, and *oh my god*, someone call a doctor because Mike thinks his heart just stopped.

Alright, he *isn't* drunk, exactly.

Again, it isn't that he feels drunk. Not that he has any idea how that's supposed to feel, but he's sure that this isn't helping him feel any more sober. Or awake. Or whatever. Whatever is opposite of the state he's currently in.

Really. He isn't drunk.

His head just feels full. Fuzzy. Like his brain takes just a fraction of a second too long to coordinate with his eyes when he moves his head, his limbs are somehow both weighted down and seemingly lighter, and quite obviously not under his full control.

"I... I just really want to-"

"To?"

Mike leans in then with purpose, intending to finally kiss his friend, but Will pulls his hands off of him and takes a step backward.

Groaning, Mike rakes his long hair from his face with his fingers. "You're so confusing," he sighs, shaking his head.

"What?" Will asks. He furrows his brow, his cheeks are bright red and he looks down, bringing his thumb to his mouth to chew on the nail.

"I don't know what you want."

"I'm sorry, okay?"

"You're sorry? For what?"

"Just... just stop!" Will shouts.

There it is. The word he's been dreading to hear. There it is, taking up all the space in the air between the two of them, un-wedging itself out of all of the corners and dark crevices putting itself on display. *STOP* like a big, bright sign, like flashing red traffic lights glaring in Mike's face.

"I *want* you to stop lying and you just- you can't even do that!" Will hollers, throwing his hands up.

"I'm not lying!" Mike shouts back at him.

But Will only rolls his eyes and hurries out of the room. Mike nearly freezes, he can hear his footsteps as he rushes out, can hear him angrily mumbling something to Steve and Jonathan, can hear the creak and slam of the back door as Will runs away from him.

No, he thinks, *I'm not letting him get away from me this time*. So he takes off after Will, out of his bedroom, through the dining room, down the back door steps, and out into the backyard.

Mike can just barely make out his *overlapping silhouette* in the darkness.

"I'm sorry," He says from behind. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong. I'm an idiot." He takes a deep breath and inhales, feeling as if he's about to cry. "Why don't you like me?"

Will turns around. His heart pounds. "*Don't.*"

"No. No! You're just pushing it aside like you don't even hear me. God. I..." he runs his hands into his hair and pulls, his face twisting up in anguish. "This is torture. You looking the way you do, acting all indifferent-

"What?"

"*What. Fucking what. Like you don't know.*"

“Know? Know what?”

“Jesus, Will, I know you’re not this thick! You know that I’m batshit crazy about you! You know that I’m out of my mind!”

“Mike, please. Can you just-”

“What?”

“Shut the *fuck up* for two seconds! What do you want me to say?”

“Answer my question.”

This is all going horribly wrong and he doesn’t know how to fix it.

“ *Question?* What question? Just stop it. You’re drunk.”

Mike is undeterred. If anything, his expression turns more fierce.

“Have I been drunk the last nine, almost, ten years?” His fierce look deepens suddenly into a burning glare, as he declares, with full confidence, “I like you.”

Setting a cool stare on him, Will states, "You have a girlfriend."

"So?"

"Your girlfriend is my sister. So fucking act like it, Mike. What do you think you're doing right now?"

Surprise flickers across his face, before it dissolves quickly into a look of defiance, a challenge he's posing to Will. "Tell me you don't feel the same. Say it. I wanna hear you say it."

Will pulls back like he's been hit. "I get it," he spits, fists shaking with fury. "I'm going back inside. You can leave if you want."

"Wait-"

Mike makes a grab for his arm, but is forcibly shoved off.

"Don't worry. I won't say anything to El." He seethes. "We'll just pretend this didn't happen."

El kisses him through it and through it until suddenly there's a tipping point - there's a series of what feels like sharp stabbings at his head, *one-two-three* and Mike pushes Eleven off of him urgently and stumbles to kneel in front of the toilet.

“Mike, are you okay?”

He can't answer. He's too busy seeing doubles of the toilet bowl as he hoists himself over it with shaking arms, head lolling downward like a bowling ball. And he heaves.

“Mike-” A strong arm snakes under his folded chest, forces him a little more upright, but the pressure causes him to throw up another fluid mass of -

He coughs weakly, opens his watering eyes. Hearing El's gasp makes him pitch forward one last time, dry-heaving, fists clenching the sides of the toilet bowl so hard his knuckles turn white. His shoulders rise and fall with his quick panting a few more times, and then just as quickly as the disorientation had come, he's completely purged of it.

As soon as control of his breathing comes back to him in a jerk, Mike is aware of the hand carding through his hair. He swallows, and goes to the sink to wash out his mouth without a word.

“Y'alright now?” She says carefully.

He inhales, and catches his eyes in the mirror. “I think I just drank too much. ”

-

Mike pauses, eyes dropping to the floor while he takes a deep breath in. "I'm sorry. About last night." He says to the ground. ***Sorry that I tried to kiss you?*** "I didn't mean to... you know." He stares blankly ahead for several seconds, before ducking out of the room.

-

"Please," he whispers, throat tight with cold fear, "Will, you don't want to do this. This isn't you. The mindflayer's using you."

"You're right," Will says, but he applies more pressure instead of less, and Mike tenses up so fast he almost submerges further underwater. His eyes blur into warping shapes as Mike's vision begins to fill with tears earnestly. "I don't want to. I *need* to."

"*Please stop*," he repeats in a wheeze, because he can think of nothing else to say. "Please, Will. You're in there. I know you are. You have to fight back. Please, I'm begging you."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's what we were saying before you and your friends killed us," The fake Will hisses, starting to force Mike's entire body down the side of the tub by the clamp of his hand around his neck.

Mike is going to drown. Mike is going to be suffocated in a bathtub, and he -

He's in a *bathtub* . Bathtubs have plugs.

In a surge of desperation, he holds his breath and lets himself be pushed further down, in order to extend his legs as far to the other side as they'll go, feet frantically fighting against the immobility that Will's full body weight impairs and jutting against the walls of the tub, the floor, and finally something that feels round, metal -

"Don't try and get clever now, Mike," He says, jerking his head up by the neck and slamming him back down. The words reach him with gurgled underwater, and it sounds like a death sentence, and Mike's running out of breath, he's lost the plug, he's exhaling too fucking fast, he's gonna die, he breathes in a burning lungful of water, and -

He wakes up, in the dark of his room.

Instantly, his eyes sting with the presence of tears, because *how* could he dream such a thing?

He stares at the ceiling, wide-eyed and unblinking, waiting for the tears to evaporate and the dread pooling in his stomach to stop stealing his breath.

He spends the rest of the night biting his trembling lip and willing himself to forget it had ever happened.

Will purses his lips at the bags under Mike's eyes, the next morning, the picture of disapproval. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

He thinks of his dream-ridden sleep and about lying awake in bed until the sun had come up, "I... had a nightmare."

His best friend is obviously unamused if his flat, incredulous stare is any indication, but he skips over that and then asks in a low voice,

"Why didn't you call?"

He's always been the first person Mike calls when plagued by worries, *it goes both ways*, especially with nightmares, because Will somehow always knows the words to ease him again. Neither pays any mind to what ungodly time of the night it is or whether they'll be waking the other up from a peaceful sleep, so there shouldn't be any reason he hadn't called last night.

-

"You love me." It's a statement. An accusation. A plea. El tries again, her voice pooling like she regrets the words before they've been spoken, "*You love me, right?*"

Mike's mouth is sealed shut. His eyes are wide, and the sight of El makes him feel sick again. There's something unnatural in her expression, it's apprehension. It's his fault.

Silence is not supposed to be so loud.

The pause that comes next is convoluted with thought, and Mike opens his mouth once as if to speak. He then shuts it. His expression sours amidst the tension, then: “I do.”

Eleven breaks for long enough to let out a quiet, “What?”

“I do love you.”

The words are a nail and mallet, a hammer struck down the middle of his chest. The words aren’t fair.

“No, you don't. Not like that.”

Mike wants to leave. He wants to drag himself from this pool of repetition and never come back. He wants things that are selfish, but instead he stays, leaning against the Byers' kitchen counter like it'll bear the entire weight of these words where Will steals bits and pieces of his heart and stitches them together behind El's back.

He stays. That’s what they do.

The seams begin to rip.

“I- exactly like that.”

They're bleeding all over the floor. Mike doesn't know how they'll ever clean up a mess this severe.

"Don't say that to me. That's not fair to either of us and you know it." She says, but the anger he wants to well up is nowhere to be found. There is nothing. Just a building pressure looming around his thoughts and pushing. Asphyxiation crushes him in the form of sixteen words.

This is the eye of every storm he's ever been caught in.

Kissing her is unwinding everything they've ever had together.

Her grip on Mike's shirt relaxes. The cue in itself isn't unusual between them, but the severity of their touch is, El's hands are gone a moment later, her fingertips a whisper on his shoulders. His body is searing, stomach high and waiting for everything to cave in on him. The space between them is no longer a lethal drop, but a series of centimeters.

"I'm sorry."

"You're not."

-

"It's a best friend telepathy thing."

Will smiles at him, but even so, Mike isn't inclined to begin crying on his shoulder any time soon. He simply stares at the TV, and Will does the same. He begins shooting furtive glances at Mike, worrying that he overstepped, before, *possibly*, remembering that the two of them have never had any boundaries to begin with.

"Mike," he tries again, much gentler this time. "Are you okay?"

"I guess. It was kind of going downhill for a while anyway."

Will is surprised. "It was?"

"Yeah. We were fighting a lot, over stupid things. If she didn't end it, I probably would have." He shrugs, as if an eight month relationship that ended yesterday, for good, is nothing to cry about.

Will bites his lip, then says, "That's too bad. You and El were good together."

The words feel as stale as empty cardboard.

He looks up to his best friend and all he wants to do right now is press his mouth to Will's jaw, leave kisses there, and murmur to him sweetly, *I think I've loved you since before I even knew what love was.*

Mike's eyes narrow. "*Do you really think that?*"

He has nothing to say to that.

Mike stammers out, “El didn’t really say that to you, did she?”

For a brief flicker of a moment, something that resembles concern passes through Will's face, but the shadow of concern dissipates as quickly as it had appeared, and he scoffs. “She asked me if I like you.” Holding up two fingers, he forms quotes around his next words. “Like that.”

Mike's throat lurches and he stabs his straw back into his glass. “What did you say?”

Will gives him a flat look. “What do you think I said?”

“I...” His tongue swipes over his lips and he admits, in a quiet voice, “I know what I would have wanted you to have said.”

The corner of Will's mouth twitches, barely discernible, it's the only reaction that suggests he'd been affected by the words in any way.

If Mike wants to say: *I'm in love with you*, then he should just fucking say it. Now's the time.

He doesn't.

There's a girl behind the counter, about the age of fifteen, who snaps to attention when Will slides into her view and begins perusing the flavors on the menu board behind her. Mike notices how she tucks her bangs neatly behind her ear and stands a bit straighter.

Will, for all his peculiar awareness and perceptive eyes, doesn't seem to notice any of this.

The worker smiles, her ponytail bouncing as she scoops up vanilla into little cups and hands them over.

"Free of charge," she says, fiddling with the ends of her hair. "Because you're, um, our fiftieth customer served today. Yeah."

"Cool. Thanks." Will replies breezily.

She looks as if the wind has been knocked out of her, she won't stop staring and isn't really blinking at all. But he still doesn't notice, despite her blatant gaze. He turns to Mike instead, and asks, "Do you want mine?"

That stare quickly switches targets, straying for the first time towards Mike who has hidden himself away, hoping to go unnoticed, who stands there silently with his one scoop of ice-cream. She frowns deliberately.

Mike feels queasy, and finds it hard to swallow. It's been so long since he's felt this way standing next to Will - but he's so embarrassed.

"No. I don't."

And Mike turns on his heel, slinking out of the parlor as briskly as he can without breaking into a jog, and he hears Will call out his name, startled, from somewhere behind him but doesn't stop. There's a bench just a few blocks down and that's where he sits, rubbing his shoes one over the other and trying to get the odd feeling to dissipate. Thinking of Robin and Steve in their old scoops ahoy outfits, that weird feeling of nostalgia, and the overwhelming scent of vanilla.

Mike bursts through the front door out of breath and hurried, kicking off his shoes before bolting up to his room without bothering to greet his parents, even as he hears his mother calling after him, asking him what's wrong, like she can hear the panic in his footsteps. He runs up the stairs and slams his door shut behind him, leaning back against it like it'll keep out anything bad from happening, trying to slow his racing heart.

There's this ache somewhere behind his ribcage, slowly expanding until he can feel it all the way down to his fingertips, and he has no idea what it means. It makes him want to do something stupid and impulsive like scream or throw something or just keep *running and running and running* and never stop, and he thinks the closest thing he can come up with that makes any kind of sense is just anger.

He's angry, but it's an odd kind of anger, a kind where he can't quite pinpoint ground zero, heavy on his shoulders. He's never felt this kind of angry before. He doesn't even know what he's angry about.

He flops down on his bed, trying to squash the ugly feeling. He can't tell where it's coming from, this feeling like a wild animal is trying to claw its way out of his chest, and he has no idea what he's supposed to do with *any* of it. He doesn't even know what to call it.

He grabs a pillow and smushes it over his face, letting out a scream.

-

Mike swallows the sudden burn in his throat, and has to look away.

But Will cups his face, not letting him escape. Eyes impossibly kind, kinder than he's ever seen. "That night. Did you mean what you said?"

Oh.

"Will," he struggles to say. "I-"

There's a knock on the door. Jonathan's voice cuts through it. "El and Max came back and they brought pizza. Come get some before it gets cold."

-

“Now all we need is for Lucas and Max to get back together.” Will hums, considering. “But then I’d have to deal with them being all gross and romantic again. Ugh. Couples disgust me.”

“Why?” Mike asks.

“It’s probably impossible for me to like anyone else except for my soulmate.” Will says, and Mike’s stomach dips.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“That puts me in your range, doesn’t it?” He tries to act like it’s a joke.

“I guess.” Will turns to him, grinning. Mike wants to shake him, until Will tells him what he’s really thinking, he wants to know if Will knows, he wants to tell him *we’re soulmates*, and call it a day.

His face is bright red.

-

Will acts like their conversation never happened, and Mike sighs internally and plays along. As the weeks pass and the beginning of a new school year approaches, Mike thinks that maybe he's wrong. Maybe he just imagined the entire thing in some kind of hyper-realistic dream.

Being friendzoned isn't all that bad. It's like being in jail, but there's a working toilet and the food is edible... and... yeah, yeah this sucks.

-

This morning does not allow him *any* luxuries.

It doesn't even allow him more than a few minutes to himself when loud footsteps headed towards his room cause him to groan. He's here already.

Mike counts down. Ten steps up the stairs. Four steps down the hall. And two firm, careful knocks before that propriety dissolves and the door opens.

Then a voice shouts, "*Mike!*"

"Go away," he grumbles into his pillow, eyes closed. He's fairly sure he hasn't said it loud enough to be heard, but Will has always had a

way of catching every little thing about a person they didn't want noticed.

Mike feels his mattress dip, and then that voice by his ear teases, *"Did you say something?"*

"I said it's too early." He chickens out.

"Maybe if it wasn't the first day of school, sure."

"I didn't ask you to do this," Mike huffs.

Will hears him clearly this time. "Oh, really? I thought this was our agreement. You stay up way too late and I come, early, to wake you up."

That's all the warning Mike receives before firm hands suddenly force their way into his blanket, dig, and yank him sloppily off the bed. His eyes shoot open, head whipping out, only to see Will's face, secretly behind the cover of his bangs, and finds him carefree, smiling the vague grin that Mike realized is never not on his face when they're around each other as he holds Mike firmly to his chest.

"Get changed."

"See? You made us late and now we're gonna have to fight our way through all these people."

"Hey. Will. Give him a break." Jonathan laughs, and so does Nancy alongside him.

An even less pleasant thing, is watching hordes of students push one another in their attempt to see the class placements . He's content to stand back, just wait until the crowd dwindles before looking for his name printed in small characters along with hundreds of others.

Will has other plans. "Come on," he sighs, and catches Mike's wrist.

"Will, wait-" He begins, but his voice doesn't have much presence. All it takes is several voices speaking over him at once, and he gets lost somewhere in the noise. He finds himself alone in the crowd not a moment later. A shove, a kick, Will, Nancy and Jonathan are nowhere to be found.

Mike feels his lungs contract, finds it hard to breathe properly. He's all alone and the crowd is stifling, made up of grubby teenagers who chatter a mile a minute and won't stop laughing - *why won't they stop laughing?* Mike feels sweaty, and an accidental elbow to his side makes him shrivel into himself.

"Sorry." The perpetrator throws over his shoulder, half laughing as he catches up with his friends.

Mike rubs his aching side, and finds his way through the crowd until he stumbles upon the front door, almost tripping on his way out.

Taking in air is like taking in life.

Will finds him a few minutes later hunched up against the wall.

"Mike!" He curses low under his breath. "Sh-shit. Mike. Are you okay? What happened? Shit, I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Mike mumbles, because he's always hated apologies, and has never known what face to make when he's at the end of one, or how to accept one when he feels like there's a flashing **Game Over** in his head.

"No, it's not okay," Will growls at himself. "I feel like the biggest ass."

"You're not an ass," He replies automatically, rubbing one foot over the other with unease.

Will shoots him a long look. He must see something in his tense posture, in the way he shifts his weight or swats at his bangs or tilts his mouth with heightened unease.

Mike glances up at the fingers that slide over his hair. He falters at the sudden gentleness on Will's face, warm eyes and a firm jaw like he's being affectionate with precise focus.

"It'll be okay," Will says to him. He doesn't stop the smooth glide of his fingers into Mike's hair easing him. "It's a lot but it'll be okay."

"I feel so uncool right now." Mike says, wiping his running nose with his sleeve.

"You were never cool?"

He bursts out laughing, and a few stray tears leak from his eyes but he doesn't really notice them or doesn't care, not in front of Will.

-

Will is made up of arms and legs and unexpected snarky responses. He's tentative in what he takes, starving when he takes it. His eyes are thieves even when his hands aren't, stealing memories and weaving Mike's thoughts unintentionally.

His favorite pieces are as follows:

Will's smile hidden. His eyes, beautiful and golden. The twist of his laugh in the air. The shape of a scowl. His arms reaching towards the sky, free and unrelenting. Shoulders curved into a lilting 'C'. The way his words sound as he speaks for Mike and only for him. His anger, his indifference, his care.

When it comes to Will, there is nothing he couldn't love.

In his head it's some type of worship. Some level of devotion, clutching at a wish and loving the thought of it enough to make a museum of things he would never forget. He'll take the collection to his grave and bury it as the last thing on his tongue, a show of simple sacrifice. He'll choke on all the love as it comes rushing out of him. He blinks and the world is made of bleeding memories and burning moments.

Mike is sick. He's full.

-

They end up playing Never Have I Ever with pouches of grape Caprisun. It's not a very exciting game, to be honest, and the game eventually spirals into a massive joke.

"Never have I ever remotely liked or thought a friend was hot," Dustin says, and most of them laugh and shamelessly drink. Mike refuses to look at Will when he takes a sip.

"Never have I ever secretly not liked the person I was dating. *Anyone?*" Max says jokingly, but the atmosphere suddenly changes when El takes her pouch and raises it to her mouth. She jerks her chin, and Mike follows suit. There's dead silence throughout the room.

"*Plot twist*," Lucas murmurs, which does absolutely nothing to diffuse the tension.

And it's awkward. They just stare at the floor for a good minute, silent, trying to figure out *how* and more importantly *why*.

After that, they all shrug and decide to tuck into their sleeping bags and go to sleep next to the person they were closest to.

Sometime during the night, Will rolls over until his sleeping bag is uncomfortably close to Mike's, his arm slung across Mike's chest. It's not even that intimate of a gesture - *seriously*, less than five percent of Will's body is currently in contact with his, but Mike is a confused teenager so he immediately freaks out, and in the process, ends up waking Max.

(She walks over to where he is on the floor and hits him for the inconvenience.)

-

So Will likes guys, (*he might* , Mike doesn't know for sure) and Mike likes guys. That doesn't necessarily mean they like each other.

But it does mean Mike is more aware of things when they're alone in the gym locker room. While Will doesn't seem to mind, Mike adamantly avoids eye-contact, his face fire-engine red. He's shuffling to get his clothes on faster, humming so off-tune it's clear it's a forced attempt to keep the situation as "regular" as possible.

He calls himself stupid for wondering.

-

He throws an arm over Will's shoulders like it's natural, pulling him towards his chest and keeping him there.

"Come on, let's just go."

The anger is burning still. It's hot under his skin, hot enough that he knows Will can feel it too, searing lines onto the back of his neck, but neither of them pull away from each other as they walk down the road on the way to Dustin's house for a hangout. Will's good enough at hiding his feelings, but not good enough to hide them from Mike.

Mike pulls away from Will a second earlier than he would have. The air is dizzying.

"It didn't matter." He says it very matter of factly, and for a moment Mike feels hysterical.

Mike tries to smile, runs a hand through the tangles of his hair, and refuses to look back at Will. "I know." The look deepens into something worse than a frown, something that plays a balancing act between aggravation and delirium, and when he speaks his voice mirrors the expression, "What they said doesn't matter. I don't care."

"I know. I don't care either." Will's voice is flat, a trick he's learned from too many years of talking circles around people until they leave him alone.

Mike is not one of those people. "You're lying. I can tell." A moment passes. He sighs. Will can switch between disguises as easily as he likes, but that doesn't mean he has to believe them. "They were being assholes. It was annoying. They can't just say that type of shit about you. He was basically asking to get decked."

"But you didn't need to do that. It wasn't even a fair fight," he says after a second too long, each word frayed with distaste.

"He deserved it."

"He was being an asshole, and then you decided to be one too." It's not even an insult. It's a fact.

-

"Drop it, Will."

*When I'm around you it's like my brain is conditioned to be your friend.
You don't make **me** a good person.*

"Look, whatever-"

Mike whirls around, snapping. "Can you just *drop it*? I can't deal with this right now!"

"You're not dealing with it at all, whatever it is," Will says irritably. "Ignoring it isn't helping."

"Yeah, well, you grilling me isn't helping either!"

"I'm not trying to grill you, but you can't just bottle everything up-"

"I can and I will!"

Why can't he just *listen* ? Why can't he see that he isn't helping, and just leave Mike the fuck alone? *Nothing* can fix things. *Nothing* can fix him.

"Don't pretend like you don't do the same thing." The words feel final coming out of his mouth, and he hates it. "Just leave me alone."

He hopes so hard to hear Will's voice calling out behind him.

All he needs is that voice. He needs to hear that voice.

He doesn't.

So Mike rounds the corner, teeth clenched as a memory seeps up beneath his agitation, the touch of soft fingers brushing lightly against his in the early-morning sun, some murmured secret, quiet in his ear, and the warmth of a body pressed to his.

Something happy. Something safe.

This time when he walks away, Will doesn't follow.

-

Mike finds himself in the Byers' bathroom, sitting on the toilet with Max towering over him, hair clippers in hand. Will is leaning on the sink for support, hands gripping the ledge behind him, Dustin is on the floor tile, legs extended by the bathtub, and Lucas and El are in the tub, knees drawn to their chests but still knocking legs.

"Jessica asked me to the winter formal." Will says, eyes and attention focused on picking off a piece of paint from the sink.

"Wait. For real?" Dustin asks, looking between everyone, and when he stops on Mike he can feel his face heat up.

Lucas wiggles his eyebrows, “She asked you out?”

“I mean, not really... I guess?” Will mutters, confused and shrugs sheepishly.

Max scoffs and rolls her eyes. “She was totally flirting with you during math. It doesn't take that long to understand a basic trig question.”

“Yeah, but that doesn't mean she wants to go out with me or anything.” Will points out. “She just,” he continues mumbling, “Asked me to the dance.”

Mike fiddles with his fingers and when he looks up, he's surprised to find El staring at him. Max has a small smirk gracing her lips as she clips the side of his hair with the scissors, the bit of hair falling down to the floor.

Is it selfish to want the person you love all to yourself?

Eleven looks at her brother, arms holding her knees close to her chest, “Let's just call it like it is. She wants you in her pants.”

Mike gawks, coughing, and the rest of them only seem to find this amusing, laughing, and nodding in agreement with her statement. Their laughter is stopped short as Will stammers nervously, trying to figure out a quick-witted response, but comes up short.

He groans into his palms, “Ugh, you guys are the worst. *Seriously*, that's disgusting.”

After a second the room turns silent, and Mike asks the burning question: “Are you gonna go with her?”

“No,” Will flashes a wiry awkward smile. “I just don't know what to tell her though.”

“So you're blowing her off?” Lucas says this as if he can't believe it, shaking his head.

“Shut up, Lucas,” Max responds to the comment, her eyes not leaving Mike. *Clip, clip, clip*. “He doesn't *have* to go with her if he doesn't want to.”

Will combs a hand through his hair, very Steve Harrington esque, despite looking almost exactly like his older brother. “Yeah, well, I think I have enough awkward school dance memories to last me a lifetime.”

They shut up after that.

The whole thing is exhausting. By the time lunch rolls around, at least half of the party, including Nancy, Jonathan, and Robin are asleep, resting their heads on the lunch table.

By the time it's two o'clock, Mike's brain is turned into jello and he feels like he's been stapled to his chair. The aggressive tick-tocking of the clock gives him a headache. He thinks about how he'd be lucky if he got even half the problems on his midterm correct, because even though he's been given a bunch of information, he's too tired to process any of it.

"Fuck," Mike groans. He rubs his eyes. "I'm so dead."

-

"Completely obvious. Absolutely transparent. Glass windows are opaque in comparison to how transparent you were."

"You're a fucking brick wall," is Will's response, "And just as dense."

"Your mom is a brick wall."

"Your *face* is a brick wall."

"*Ouch.*" Mike says. He laughs and takes Will's hand in his own since he's pretty sure, after all these years, he's allowed to do that without any warning.

-

"Come on." The sun has gone down now, darkness surrounding them, and the single bulb of the streetlight illuminates from all around. The light flickers slowly before returning to normal.

There is no movement.

"You, *come on*. Don't make a guy look more uncool than he already does."

"It suits you, though," is what Will says in return, his eyes glint sharply in the streetlight and he's already shuffling closer, securing the straps of his backpack.

Mike takes in a stabbing breath, then walks forward, his body impressively steady.

"This was your idea by the way."

He holds his hands up in defense. "Sorry, I thought stargazing would be cool."

Their squabbling echoes among the rustling leaves, the only sounds in the deserted, moonlit park aside from the trees and the rattling

chains of swings.

Mike wonders how some things about them could have remained so stagnant through the years when everything else has changed so completely.

He wonders if Will could have predicted any of this, back when he approached him with his pushy friendship and budding crush. Looking at him bathed in the moonlight, Mike hopes not. He hopes that the extent of their feelings, the extent of what they always had the potential to become, will be a winding journey for the both of them.

And that's okay. He has time.

They have time.

-

This is, for certain, is all the things that Mike has *never* wanted.

But if someone were to ask him, right here, right then, what he does want, that would be a myriad number of answers.

He wants to lose himself every day in video games, but only with a presence behind him creating mundane white noises. He wants to get vanilla ice-cream on warm summer days, but only with a certain

someone. He wants a steaming mug of hot cocoa on winter nights, but only with a certain someone. He wants to be touched and traced and caressed, every inch of him explored, but only by a certain someone.

Everything he doesn't want and everything he does, everything he's never wanted and everything he will ever want - they converge to a single focal point. They all meet at the defining crossroad of Will Byers' entire being.

Lips shaking, Mike leans forward to slide his hands onto Will's waist and both boys are frozen.

Mike feels his breath catch in his throat. There's this tingly feeling all over, and butterflies in his stomach. His heavy eyelids are a fraction too slow to blink, his irises too stationary. It's as if Mike's brain is suffering a massive short circuit and is struggling to compute.

They both lean in, a hand threads through his hair lightly and Mike knows what's coming next. His lips part slightly, his eyes flitting down to rest on Will's pink lips before he sees Will close his eyes.

He's frozen for maybe three whole seconds before the corners of his mouth resume their usual softness.

His eyes flicker shut.

Mike can imagine this.

He imagines showing up at the Byers doorstep, with the party, stealing Dustin's baseball cap to protect himself from the sun and flushed cheeks that weren't solely turned red from the heat.

He imagines telling Joyce and Jonathan and being engulfed in a million hugs he'll never get from his parents.

He imagines Will finding the coziest and quietest diner he can because he knows those are some of Mike's favorite types of places.

He imagines laying on Will's thigh all evening and letting him play with his hair, letting him touch and trace and caress every part of him, not having to worry about stopping because someone else might see. He imagines a life unhindered by anyone else, just him and Will living out their days together.

In a single second everything shatters.

“If I had a flower for every time I thought of you, I could walk in my garden forever.”

- Alfred Lord Tennyson

Three.

(January 13th, 1986)

It started out small. Blushing whenever Will's hand brushed up against his. A tiny crush on his best friend that he pushed down for years. Liking Eleven for the sole reason that she looked like a boy - and her resemblance to Will was, *and still is*, strikingly similar. Seeing just how upset Will was about their fight. Directing the words at himself. Watching him destroy Castle Byers, his safe space. Convincing himself he was "normal" and "in-love" with his non-soulmate, El.

Because, the more he thinks about it, the love was always there. From the beginning.

And it's tearing him up inside.

Mike is an odd daze afterwards. It takes him longer than normal to get home from school, his mind and thoughts racing, yet empty. He's trying to figure out if that really just happened - it feels like something out of a movie, or some weird dream. It doesn't feel quite real.

His backpack is heavy with textbooks, weighing him down as he pedals down Old Cherry Road, with a short glance to Max's house as he zips across the street and turns towards Mirkwood.

Mike places his bike on the side of the house and opens the door with his key. When he gets inside he's set for his room. Walking through the hall he feels woozy and is up two steps of stairs when a voice coming from the kitchen calls out, "Michael? Is that you?"

Mom.

“No, it’s an axe murder!” He exclaims and runs up the stairs. (“*Haha. Not funny.*”)

"I don't think it's a good idea for us to hang out anymore."

He slams his door and collapses to the ground, knees hugging his chest and sobbing like a child. It's all gone. Declined. There's nothing to do. Tears form in the corner of his eyes until he sees blurry, still, he's shocked, how can everything he's built in his life just fade away within mere seconds?

So it did happen.

When he was with Will, he felt like he could conquer the goddamn world. Even if angry bees were buzzing around his ribcage and his heart fought to beat out of his chest and his thoughts were always kind of fuzzy. But despite all of that, he was still pretty fucking fearless whenever Will was by his side.

Mike's night is spent awake, bloodshot eyes tired from crying. When he hears a knock on his door and the voice of his older sister he tells her to go away, because he doesn't want to talk about it.

(January 17th, 1986)

It's his birthday. His fifteenth. He's dreading it. Last night he didn't get nearly enough sleep and he woke up with dark purple bags under his eyes. Mike doesn't feel any different that he did from yesterday, he still feels like himself, and like shit. He truly has to be himself and stay stuck in his own skin and that? That fact will haunt him for the rest of his days.

He's bombarded by his little sister and mother with a cake and tries his hardest to have a cheery attitude. Nancy left him a note on the kitchen table, reading:

Happy birthday little brother. Sorry I'm not here when you wake up. I have a backdated interview with The Post. Again. (Not with Tom or Bruce this time, for obvious reasons.)

He tries his hardest to avoid the main area of the house as his father might be lurking about and he really doesn't have the energy for any of it.

The party calls over the supercomm. Dustin suggests a sleepover which Mike shuts down quickly. Max rambles about some kid almost beating her high score at Dig Dug while Lucas calls it bull and that the kid wasn't even close. El is quiet, though she gives him a 'happy birthday' and presumably stays on for the rest of the call.

It's definitely a surprise when he opens the front door and finds Will standing there, lips pursed, a bag in his hand.

His eyes blow wide. “Will.”

“Hi.” Mike can tell he’s trying his hardest not to run away right at the moment. “Uh, happy birthday.”

“T-Thanks.”

They’re quiet for a few seconds, looking anywhere but each other, until Will speaks again. “ *Right*. I have your stuff. It’s your clothes that were at my house and your.. toothbrush. I told Jonathan to put it in the wash with our load.” He tilts his head, lifting up a shoulder and hands him the bag. “And you can just throw out the stuff you have of mine.”

There's so much he wants to say. “Will-”

“Mike.” Will says with an edge in his voice. “Just do it.”

“Okay.” He nods, feeling a tear form in his eye but he somehow manages to hold it back. And that’s it. Will walks away, stuffing his hands into his back pockets, down the block without another glance and Mike breaks.

His thoughts drift, ghosting over hundreds of things buzzing away in his mind, but can’t stick to anything in particular.

Eventually, he leans back and closes his eyes. He can't sleep, his body

won't let him, but he doesn't really care. The lights are still on in his room. He huffs out a breath and cracks his eyes to look back up at the popcorn ceiling once again.

He needs this to be over.

(January 21st, 1986)

He's so annoyed these days.

Annoyed isn't the word. Agitated (*maybe?*) - at everything.

Everything has him on edge.

A hand slams his locker shut. When he looks up, it's Max, clutching onto her skateboard tightly and looking at him with hard eyes.

"Something's up." She says with much certainty, "Where were you at lunch? You're ignoring us so you *better* tell me what's going on right now."

He doesn't have time for this shit.

"You don't ever stop do you?"

“What?”

Mike huffs out a breath. “Nothing’s up. Just leave me alone.”

Max follows him down the hall as he begins walking to his next class. “One, Will’s been basically unresponsive for the past couple of days and two, you guys can’t go a day without seeing each other. So you’re seriously telling me nothing is wrong? I know we don’t get along great sometimes but c’mon,” She nudges his arm, “You can tell me if something is wrong. You know that right?”

“Jesus.” They stop for a second in the middle of the crowded hallway. “Not everything has to be some huge conspiracy. Just leave it alone. Okay?”

(February 9th, 1986)

Max listened and left it alone. Something in him wishes she didn’t but regardless he avoids any of their hangout places. The party picked up on it because immediately something shifted. El, Max and Dustin stick by Will most of the time while Lucas is with him fifty percent of the time, allotting the party twenty five percent and the rest to the new friends he made on the school’s debate team. Dustin keeps on pestering him about it and El keeps staring like she’s trying to figure him out.

He’s pretty sure the party’s falling apart.

(February 25th, 1986)

“Dude, holy shit, did you get any sleep last night?” asks Lucas on Monday morning in homeroom.

“M' Fine.” Mike says on reflex.

“That wasn't the question?”

“Fine,” he repeats, eyebags sagging and dark. He slumps into his seat like ooze, or like someone who had spent their entire weekend doing a sleepless deep dive into themselves.

Move on.

Move on.

Move on.

(February 28th, 1986)

Slammed doors aren't uncommon in the Wheeler household but they signify something and he most definitely knows what it means, from crying, to yelling, to long periods of absence, it means something is wrong. No matter how much they advertise as the picture perfect family.

Something he cannot control is his millions of responses downloaded into his mind as he gauges a reaction.

His gut twists. It's the first real registered feeling he's had in over a month, and the dominos begin to fall. Mike feels heavy. Mike is tired. Mike is aching, scared, distressed and *the shame, the shame, the shame...*

His mother is in the living room, one hand on her face as she cries. "What did you say to your father?"

"I- nothing."

"You were arguing. What did you say?"

"Mom," Nancy interjects, "Whatever he said to dad doesn't matter. This isn't his fault."

She laughs bitterly. "Sure."

This isn't even his mother. Karen is a woman he's never met before.

Slowly Mike turns, disregarding Nancy's protests, up a couple of steps and to the wall, resting his head against it, squeezing and shutting his eyes to stop the burning tears.

Karen whines. "Oh my god, this isn't happening."

He shouldn't have the right to cry when it's true.

Mike is blowing off some steam at the diner he and Nancy usually go to, late night, lip jutting out under a mass of wild curls, nose running, sniffing to himself as he dips another fry into his strawberry milkshake and thinks of crying until his head turns at the sound of a familiar voice lowly calling out his name.

"Mike," Steve says, "Are you okay, man? You seem kinda spaced out."

That's all it takes for the tears to completely break open.

"Shit. Sorry. I didn't mean-" Steve rubs his arm and Mike instinctively moves over so he can sit next to him in the small booth. "What'd I say?"

He can tell Steve is trying to be comforting, to take on the mom caretaker role but it has never come easy to him, not as easily as he makes it seem.

Mike shakily let's out his grief and wipes his eyes once Steve let's him go out of his vice like protective grip.

"What's wrong?" Steve raises an eyebrow, "Do you need me to beat up some dick head up for you cause' I will."

"No," Mike says in a shaky wet laugh.

He steadies himself, taking a breath.

He takes another breath and exhales.

"I got into a fight with my dad," He admits, picking up another one of his fries.

"About what?" Steve asks, stealing a fry for himself.

"It doesn't matter. It's not important."

"You were *just* crying. How is that not important? Seriously, Mike," He retorts. "You don't look too good."

Mike rolls his eyes. "Thanks."

"I'm just saying," He pauses, before sighing. "Mike, you look like you need someone to talk to. Is it more upside down shit?" He lowers his tone at the end of the sentence and looks around to make sure no one is eavesdropping.

"*What?*" Now Mike is busy surveying the area before looking back at Steve. "No."

"Okay, so, you were saying something about your dad?" Steve clicks his tongue. "I have special experience in that area. My dad's an asshole." He squeezes Mike's shoulder lightly, still having on that saddened expression. "At this point I'm starting to think all dads are just like that."

Mike takes a sip of his milkshake, "They suck."

Steve nods, agreeing. "Look. We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to." *Thank you.* "Is it okay if I stay a little longer? Robin has a shift and I'm gonna be alone the whole night."

He'll have to deal with everything later but for now he'll share the remainder of the night with Steve Harrington.

Mike smiles. "Yeah, sure."

(March 4th, 1986)

He has the most boring day he can at school. It is monday after all. Every class drags along and he just sits in the back, scribbling song lyrics that pop into his head. As most school days are, this one is a waste of time.

(March 19th, 1986)

Love is just a dilemma Mike tends to believe in. He knows he's using this to cover up his actual concern. The loneliness was already there. Life becomes vulnerable as he's enslaved by his own thoughts, and he tries to be normal but he just can't. Each and everything seems meaningless, at starting everything looks extraordinary and ecstatic but at the end he's left with nothing except agony and emptiness.

Mike's trying to figure out if any of it is real. He rolls onto his side, one hand splayed on his stomach.

He keeps on seeing it all in flashes. Broken Joyce. Will in the rain next to the remains of Castle Byers. Drugged up Robin. Frantic Jonathan. Forgotten Dustin. The fleshy part of the mind flayer pulling El up with it, Lucas swinging the axe, Nancy shooting at it. The bloody slit in Steve's eye. Billy shoving Max into the wall so hard it knocked her out cold immediately. Crying into Hopper's chest for lying.

Real. He determines.

(April 7th, 1986)

It's been a little over a month. Mike knows this isn't like the time he was four and his dad was gone for two weeks and came back, or, when he was nine and disappeared for three months for a "business trip" - *he* caused this.

This is his fault.

He recoils when he walks past his parents room and sees his dad, lounging like nothing ever happened, like he didn't leave for a month over a silly argument with his son.

Mike wants to tell him *I still love you, somewhere deep inside I still do. I want your approval more than anything.*

So he opts for the regular, "Hey, dad," tentatively.

Ted looks at him, unblinking. He has the same face on that he had when Nancy was angry at Mike for playing in her room.

He destroyed her favorite stuffed animal by accident, but she was devastated. To eleven year old Nancy, Mike murdered him. So she pushed her brother off of her bed, and he suffered a small casualty from the attack: a bruised leg that sent him wailing. But Nancy was

too angry to care. She marched him out of her room, down the stairs, and outside on the front porch. With a loud slam of the front door, Nancy locked him outside. Needless to say, their parents were not thrilled to find their seven year old boy crying outside the house. After that she got yelled at by their father, the only time Mike had ever seen him raise his voice.

It scared him enough to hide in the basement. Nancy went down there after a while, while she was crying, to comfort her little brother. She took a couple of sodas and a bag of potato chips as a peace offering and they spent the rest of the night watching movies. She's always been the one to comfort him. Even after she's mean to him, she has to hug him. It's her job.

Mike doesn't need his dad to yell at him right now, he needs someone to listen to him.

He looks back, frozen, taut, then he walks away and a few steps to his room because he's not sure if he can take any more.

His forearms are bloodied, scattered with deep red gashes. The bloodstained razor clatters to the tiled floor of the bathroom.

Mike falls to the floor, his heart wracked with guilt, and curls up against the door. The burning tears well up in his eyes, threatening to fall. Choking back a sob, he grasps and pulls at his hair, wishing desperately to disappear into the darkness that covers him.

(April 31st, 1986)

He's sick of wearing long sleeves in this warm weather. He really is. But he can't take away the fear of what would happen if anyone else saw what he had done to himself.

Part of Mike wishes he would so it could all be done and over with, but the other part knows he should continue to hide the marks as best he can.

He thinks back to those times, the times when he wasn't so miserable. When he was... happy. Happier than ever before. He hasn't felt that sort of feeling in a long time.

(May 26th, 1986)

Mike feels a little or a lot, never controlled and always one extreme or the other. It's clear in the way he locks himself up in his room, it's apparent in the way he says things he doesn't mean, it's ingrained in the lies that he grinds out through his teeth, claiming that he's ***fine*** when in fact nothing about this is 'fine.'

"That's what people don't understand anymore," Ted motions in the air with his fork, while Karen takes a sip out of her wine glass, exacerbated, and Nancy grits her teeth picking at the food on her plate.

"That's why it's so widespread nowadays. When I was a kid you went to church every Sunday. That's what can benefit those people, searching for god and praying for their forgiveness."

Mike can tell his dad is keeping a watchful eye on him to see how

he's reacting. He steady's his breaths, picks at his food, shoving around his mashed potatoes. It's such bullshit.

He kicks Nancy's leg. She looks at him, eyebrows raised but after a few moments she seems to get it and directs the conversation to her work.

Thank god for Nancy.

(June 10th, 1986)

Mike finds himself listless and distressed after school with no friends or interests to occupy his time and mind. His thoughts begin to race wild, until there is nothing for him to do but lie sprawled out across the basement couch, day in day out, and listen to his walkman blare

Joy Division or *Siouxsie and The Banshees* , while he watches the ceiling fan pointlessly spin its blades.

He's giving up.

Giving up on what people think about him, friends, school. He doesn't talk about his feelings, that's too vulnerable. Mike keeps them all in until they spill over. It's not good, he knows, but he doesn't care.

He doesn't know how to recover from this, and that's what terrifies him. But Will is gone and that doesn't make any logical sense. He still doesn't quite understand how, and definitely still can't accept it.

(August 5th, 1986)

I'm going to grow and grow and grow, and I'm going to get better, Mike thinks, as he buries himself more under the blankets, heart beating in absolute fury. It crawls up his throat, makes him choke back, and begs to be heard from the hollow of a gaping mouth.

Acknowledge me, see me, hear me.

I'm going to grow and grow and grow, Mike chants to himself again, letting his heart sit heavy like a knot. It's something that will never let him rest.

I just wish you were here too.

(September 1st, 1986)

"And you're sure you'll be okay driving?" Karen asks once she finishes putting the last box in Nancy's trunk.

"Mom, I'll be fine," Nancy bats a hand. "Chicago isn't that far. I'll call you as soon as I get in, promise."

"I can't believe you're leaving for college already." She shakes her head in disbelief, "I thought we had more time."

"Oh god, mom," Nancy says, watching her mother tear up and goes to wrap her into a hug, motioning a hand for Mike to join. He does, and hears an *"I'll miss you,"* and he can't exactly distinguish who it's

coming from.

He wraps his arm around Nancy's waist, pulling her to his side, still craving some additional comfort.

"You're going to be okay, Mike."

He knows he will be. For now. He's safe with his sister. The saddest part is tomorrow when he's feeling better, Nancy will be gone.

Moments like these are incredibly rare, and Mike is thankful he got this.

(September 7th, 1986)

It's the first day of another school year. Mike takes his seat in the back like he usually does and tries his hardest to concentrate on the topic at hand. Introductions.

He spaces out in the first ten minutes.

"Hell is empty and all the devils are here."

- William Shakespeare

Four.

(February 16th, 1987)

Mike doesn't know how it happened. It's as if as soon as he turned sixteen people started paying attention to him. *Girls* started paying attention to him. Some of the players' on the football team have taken a liking to him. He sits with them at lunch now and even though they're obnoxious he doesn't feel so alone anymore.

Marsha Couric told him he could help her “study” for that upcoming math test with a little smirk on her glossy red lips.

They fool around at lunch or after school. A mouth against his own, fingers brushing his jaw, and pushing up into his hair.

And when he gets that raw feeling deep in the pit of his stomach that something is wrong, he ignores it and kisses her again. Maybe, just *maybe* he can fix himself.

(March 12th, 1987)

He steps into the bathtub, water splashing against him, the burning sensation making him wince, his hand shoots out to turn down the temperature. Just on the tolerable side of painful, he fully immerses himself in, all of the fresh cuts stinging in the water. Most of them have stopped bleeding by now, blood clots dotting the white porcelain of the tub, but the first cut on the wrist keeps going, blood merging with water, spreading across his forearm, turning everything into a light red watercolor canvas. He washes it off then watches it return again, staining his now pink skin again and again.

This will not be easily forgotten. Still spitting like fire, a river of red liquid racing through the water.

He stares at the wound. With the water lapping away at the blood, he can see the inside, the fatty tissue oozing. It looks painful, but he doesn't feel much of anything. Had it been over the vein it might have killed him. No, that can't be right. It wouldn't- it *couldn't* kill him. Mike isn't going to accidentally kill himself with this.

His head hurts. Mike slips further into the pinkish warm water, running his fingers through his hair.

He takes notice how his hands have begun shaking, it's hard to keep a strong hold on the razor. Slowly, slowly, he keeps going until finally he reaches the other side of his arm. The opening seems to taper out from the original slice, he probably isn't pressing as hard, but oh boy...

The cut is big, probably the biggest he's done yet. If he had to guess, it was about a half-centimeter at its peak, maybe more. Oh, and now there's blood. A lot of blood.

Jesus Christ, that's a lot of blood. His breath catches in his throat as he tries not to retch at the sight.

He stares at himself in the mirror, hands shaking. "Oh my god, am I going crazy? I'm not crazy! I'm not crazy, this is just- No. This is insane."

How many times will he tell himself that he's gone too far? How many tally marks can Mike score on the inside of his skull, counting all the times that he just couldn't stop himself?

He watches the water drip from his hair. It's times like these he realizes just how much he hates himself. Hates what he looks like, what he's doing, who he is. Something burns in his chest. It's rage. Rage at his own existence, whatever or whoever put him here, the fact that he has to be alive and impact people around him. He doesn't want to. He doesn't want people to be affected by him. It's terrifying. It's exhausting. Every bit of advice he gives himself must be airtight and foolproof.

What if it's wrong? Who cares what anyone says anyways?

It's my fault.

(March 18th, 1987)

Mike opens the driver's side door and slips inside. He turns the keys, then takes off.

The open road is familiar. The mindless act of driving whenever he's allowed to take the car and the way the road seems to fly out from under him. The horizon is just starting to become tinged with pinks and oranges.

This is okay. Driving is okay.

Like he's done a dozen times times before, he flips on the radio.

I never meant to be so bad to you

One thing I said that I would never do

A look from you and I would fall from grace

And that would wipe the smile right from my face

This is okay. This is fine.

Do you remember when we used to dance

And incidents arose from circumstance

One thing led to another we were young

And we would scream together songs unsung

Mike ignores the heavy feeling in his chest that screams that something is missing.

So he drives.

And drives.

And drives.

(April 11th, 1987)

Mike *hates*.

He's angry. Always angry, always guilty, finally feeling and wishing he couldn't. Snappy, hateful and angry and empty and gone.

He is everything at once - sad, fearful, cold, angry. He switches from being terrified of something to being angry in an instant. His actions have no meaning, right? *He's not even alive! He's not even real!* It doesn't matter. He is self destructive and violent in general, not caring for anyone it affects until his rare moments of lucidity. When that fog clears, though, and he recognizes what he's done? He falls apart. There's no energy left for anger or hate. Just awful, pervasive, desperate misery and guilt.

He struggles to breathe sometimes, suffocates on the nausea that expands right where his diaphragm is. It pushes up sometimes, tries

to spill out of his mouth or his eyes but he always pushes it back in, swallows it down and blinks it away.

It's just a mixtape, and at the same time, it isn't.

He can't listen to it, can barely hold it without choking on tears, guilt, and emptiness. It taunts him from the drawer of his dresser. Like a dirty little secret that he can barely think about having without losing feeling in his legs and sinking to the floor. Nothing makes it any better. It sits neglected and cold in the top drawer of Mike's dresser. He can't even touch it because there are no warm hands handing it over.

The mixtape starts with Will swearing at him to get better music taste. Mike has to pause it because he's crying too loudly to hear what Will says next.

"Look, I'm not great at this stuff... You're good, Mike. You're good and I'm not. I know what gives you nightmares, and I wish I could take them away. You don't deserve to be afraid."

He turns mechanical, tensed and shaking and hopelessly, undeniably cold.

"I don't know a lot of things. I pretend like I do, but I don't. I haven't in a long time. You're a good person, Mike. I want you to always remember that."

The tape chokes up, crackles a little, and Mike can hear the sound of sniffing. He doesn't know if it's himself or the tape.

"Thank you for putting up with me."

The tape clicks off.

He can't move. He can barely function through the tears. He lays in bed at night and listens to the ending message again and again.

(May 24th, 1987)

Long story short, him not eating had been the outcome. He's thinner, so thin his ribs are poking out, and his cheekbones are practically hollow. He doesn't remember much when it happens, though there are flashes every so often, there is lots of shouting, distressed voices and noise, which seems abstract and far-off and unimportant at the time, and then an ambulance. There is the uncomfortable sensation of being unconscious, and then waking up in a hospital bed.

A nurse comes and tells him what happened.

He nods with a deadpan expression, fully aware of what had happened, and finding it strange that it's now being explained to him as though it wasn't his own doing, but instead a blameless mistake. An accident with no perpetrator.

(July 29th, 1987)

Mike feels more alive than he's felt for the past year.

A dream. A nightmare. Both? He can't tell, but what he knows for certain is that he drank way too much.

He numbly leaves the party and begins to stumble his way home, the night cloaking him in its blue black velvet.

Once Mike's home, he becomes a machine. Unlock the door. Step in. Walk to his room. Remove articles of clothing. Go to the bathroom. Avoid his reflection. Shower. Watch the red swirl down the drain. Put on fresh clothes.

(August 13th, 1987)

You'd think that so many near death experiences would make him fear death, or make him desperate to want to live more, but his brain had decided long ago that's not how he's going to deal with all of that.

He scrambles to the phone and dials Nancy's number, choking back a cry as the phone rings.

A few minutes into the conversation, Mike sobs out, "I don't wanna be someone else but I don't wanna hate myself either... and *I hate*

myself , Nance.”

(October 14th, 1987)

Mike is sitting on his bed, alone. Thinking of everything he could have done, didn't do, everything he could have done differently, and he can't do anything to fix it but just sit there. He can't even cry anymore, he feels oddly numb, and disconnected from the rest of the world.

Mike's just sitting on his bed with no one to talk to about all these terrible thoughts threatening to rip him apart. The one person he needs to cheer him up isn't there, and hasn't been in a while. Not there to help him get rid of that twisting, sick feeling in his stomach because, unfortunately, they're the reason why it's there this time.

(November 5th, 1987)

Life goes on. Actions deemed heroic and those deemed villainous are different. A fine line is drawn between them. You could consider it black and white, but what happens when a single action tips over the scale of justice?

One single action with good intent can land you recognition and praise, and one with malicious intent can land you memorable, a threat.

Who defines "good?" Why should we abide by the laws of one another? Why should society dictate right and wrong?

This ideology of mine is condemned. But is it wrong? Why should I trust a society so hellbent on giving out titles? Isn't that scary?

It's nice to blame things on other people. It makes you feel better about yourself. It lasts until you realise it's not their fault, it's yours.

You're the selfish one. You're the problem.

And the shoe fits, so I suppose I'll wear it.

(December 19th, 1987)

That weird feeling in his stomach resurfaces. Instead of doing anything about it, he reaches for his Walkman and puts the earbuds in shakily as he falls down onto his bed, in the soft glow of his room.

The flattened blots of dark blood look good right now.

Suffering. That's how Mike would describe it. In other words, it's pain *and* painful. The air seems to be heavy as the agonizingly long days draw on. He feels so hollow, like everyday isn't worth living at all.

He thinks he wants love, but the truth is he can't love. Love is a figment of his imagination. He wants the version that tweaks his endorphins. He wants the version in his head. It's like electricity, when you get just enough to keep things running, it's great, but if you get it pure and unfiltered, the power will explode.

How can he get past an addiction to something not tangible? How can he shatter his bond from a halfway broken dream? How can he convince himself the past is not the future? Mike feels like he keeps stumbling, putting rocks in his own way and then crying when he trips over them.

(January 23rd, 1988)

"Mike," Victoria takes hold of Mike's face, not kindly, but not unkindly, and forces him to meet her icy blue eyes. "Tell me what you want."

Mike wants to take it all back. Wants Will to be by his side, wants Nancy to trust him, wants his friends and family to love him again. He wants to feel alive and be happy, wants to be a child again without a care in the world playing D&D in his basement, having sleepovers with his friends while carbo loading on overly buttered popcorn and cherry coke. He wants so much.

"I've been trying to devirginize you for the past two months."

It's not rape, Mike reminds himself. Not rape, because this is his choice, this has always been *his* choice. He's in control the whole time. Mike would say something if he wasn't.

He lies still, hating the chill that settles beneath his skin. It only serves to accentuate the stinging pain in his chest and thighs, the burning sensation between his legs.

(January 30th, 1988)

Mike's been on autopilot for the last week. Staring out the window. Staring into oblivion. Staring at... nothing at all. Some would call it 'daydreaming' but it carries with it all sorts of baggage, much of it negative. He grits his teeth and tenses his muscles. He feels disgusting, as if he's writhing in his own skin. It gets to the point where his mother has to ask if he's alright. He's not working, but slacking off, losing focus, and caught up in mindlessness.

It's not like he's choosing to disengage from external tasks, and decouple his attention, as much as it's that he's entering an internal stream of thought so intense he can't seem to break out of it.

(February 8th, 1988)

He doesn't close his eyes in the shower anymore.

At least on the regular he can wear layers and layers of t-shirts and sweats and socks and crewnecks that give the illusion of safety and security. The heat makes it hard to breathe and harder to sleep at night, but he can't take anything off. He refuses to. He'll sleep eventually after hours of staring at the ceiling and thinking about nothing and everything all at once.

In the shower, there's nothing to protect him. His body is bare to the never-ending stream that shouldn't be searing, but is. There's a sting to open cuts and burn of water over his thighs. But he doesn't cry and

he doesn't think. All he does is go through the motions, staring at the tile wall, counting down the seconds until he's clean enough to put on his clothes again.

Call it compartmentalizing, call it disassociation, call it pretending.

Mike has gotten good at feeling nothing.

(February 11th, 1988)

Victoria looks at him, blinking. "What- So, what are you saying?"

"What does it sound like I'm saying?"

She looks at him clearly taken aback, and then gapes. "You *can't* dump me, Mike."

"Really?" He looks at her, scrunching his face up, *"Cause' that's what I'm doing."*

A hot hand slaps his face.

(April 1st, 1988)

"When you find your soulmate," his grandmother takes his hands in her own, "Whoever she, or he is, *you never know*, you hold onto them, tight. Because it's a special thing."

"That's great advice, nana." Mike smiles genuinely. "Thank you."

He wonders how the apple could have fallen so far from the tree.

(May 6th, 1988)

"...It can save a life. There is now a danger that has become a threat to us all. It is a deadly disease and there is no known cure. The virus can be passed during intercourse with an infected person. So protect yourself. If you ignore AIDS it could be the death of you. Don't die of ignorance. The plague has continued to spread. Infecting homosexuals and normal folk across our nation. Please contact your local church if you believe a sodomite-"

Sodomite. Mike clicks the radio off.

His morning starts with black coffee, rich and dark. He's been an avid caffeine addict since the first time the sugary liquid coated his tongue. Otherwise the headaches will start and-

Positive thinking!

The voice in his head is back again . Only this time it sounds like one

of the doctors that Joyce took him to a few times for “help” in Indianapolis. His mom didn't know, and his dad didn't care. Ted complained about him needing anxiety medication to keep calm.

There is an unspoken rule between him and Nancy to never speak of it - and all that happened. They walk on eggshells around each other hoping the other won't bring it up. They agreed to never lie to each other again but when Nancy came back home knowing how to aim and shoot a gun, she insisted Mike need no explanation. *Technically* , as she said, *it isn't lying, simply withholding information. Information that you don't need.*

The same doctors that Will had seen to help with the trauma. Apparently Joyce drove Steve up there at some point as-well. Of course they couldn't go into details, for legal reasons. They didn't help much other than say “ *things will get better*” and “*how do you feel about that?*”

It's been a while since it all happened and obviously he's pissed at himself for not being able to get out of this, seemingly, never-ending depressive episode.

As he takes a sip of his hot coffee, leaning against the kitchen island, he rolls his eyes as he watches his mother, already dressed and dolled up, coming down the stairs.

Mike wonders, briefly, if he acted differently or even *was* different his parents would accept him. Not that he'll ever give them the satisfaction of being right about him by coming out to them. Sometimes he just wants to yell, and tell them to fuck off already.

God, he was so dumb to flat out tell his dad he's gay. What was he expecting? A pat on the back? A *'I'm so proud of you'*?

Of course not.

He said it out of spite.

He doesn't get it. Not really. Why his mother is always pushing him to fit in this picture perfect box, or why his father wants him to grow into a 'real man.' Whatever that means.

"Good morning." Karen says, entering the kitchen, opening the fridge door and grabbing an assortment of items. Mike shifts as she places the things down on the counter, a packet of bacon, and a carton of eggs.

"Morning, mom."

His fight or flight is kicking in, and he's choosing to flee. Before he gets the chance to exit Karen stops him, by speaking, "Jill's coming over later today. At three. Stacy's coming too."

He freezes, one hand wrapped around the hot mug. "Are you fucking with me?"

Stacy. They hate each other. Ever since they were seven it's been non-stop eye rolling and scoffs at one another's suggestions. Their

dynamic is much like his and Nancy's except for the fact that even though his older sister is insufferable sometimes, he loves her. Mike still has the scar on his left knee from the time she pushed him off the tree in the back of the house. She made Dustin cry at the Snowball. The mere mention of Stacy turns Mike off. He'd back out of a room anytime Jill or his mother talked about her. He successfully managed to slither his way out of being around her for eight months. He isn't gonna lose his winning streak after all this time.

She's a demon in human skin.

His mom is always talking about Stacy and "*Jane*" and *when are you gonna get a proper girlfriend? You don't have to settle for your soulmate. Did you even find her yet?*

Code word: **Her**.

Karen raises her eyebrows. "No, I am not *fucking* with you. You kids nowadays, if I ever spoke to Nana that way..." She trails off. "Be nice." ("*Mom!*") She gives him a stern look. "You two will get along." A pause. "You don't have plans today right?"

She knows he doesn't.

"No." He says under his breath.

"What was that?" She asks, demanding confirmation.

“No, mom. I don’t.”

“Okay. It works out great then.” She turns to the stove top and flicks on the burner, taking the olive oil from the cabinet over head and putting some on the pot in front of her, “Clean the basement.”

(May 20th, 1988)

It started out small. Glances from the other party members. Asking if anything weird was going on. Mike missing lunch and avoiding them all together. Mike was sure they’d figured it out, it was unlike them to go even a day without speaking. He was mad at first, then sad, then *overwhelmingly* sad, then broken. It hurt, of course, for his best friends to eventually ghost him, and then the only one he had left abandon him.

He's spent so many restless nights thinking about it all. How he was a dumb teenager, trying to prove something to himself by obsessing over El, wondering why his father hates him and more importantly how much he hates his father. He'd come to the conclusion that it was in fact his dad's fault and then circle back around, beating himself up.

He'd think about telling someone, anyone who would listen, really. He had two logical options, Robin or Joyce. Everytime he told himself he was gonna do it, one step away from the arcade, around the block of the Byers home, he froze, remembering his father's words.

He was scared. He still is.

He's *terrified*.

(June 5th, 1988)

Right as his locker clicks open he briefly sees Will out the corner of his eye, light brown hair messy and out of place, nervously jittering as he places his binder back in the locker in front of him. Reminding Mike of a certain quiet, reserved older Byers. The bags under his eyes are deep and dark purple, intensely brooding.

Then Mike sees the pack of basketball guys all coming in his direction. He loses all color from his face. It's as if his heart has suddenly stopped beating and all the blood has run down into his boots. His eyes flick between Will and his so-called "friends." Will moves past, and walks down the hallway, until he's out of sight.

"*Wheeler!*" One of the voices call out before they're all surrounding him. Five guys, at least.

"What's up faggot? It's been going around that you haven't been getting any pussy."

"Is that shit true?" Daniel, the one in the centre of the group, laughs like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard.

"We'll set the fag up." Someone slaps his shoulder roughly.

Everything goes in one ear and out the other. Filtering in and out at certain moments.

"- *Dick sucked!*"

"*Come on, man. You're getting as much action as -* "

How... how is Mike not exhausted from the whole thing? Having to be around people who act like this every single day? How and more importantly *why* did he become friends with these people? He pushes past them, trying to slow his breathing.

So when he finds himself walking down the hall and into the bathroom, crouched between the wall of a locked stall and the toilet, he silently sobs out between heaving breaths. *Get yourself together.*

The bell rings.

He comes to a floppy stand before his vision goes dizzy and he's forced to stumble back down onto the chilly tile floor again. The hand trembling has now traveled down into his arms and legs, leaving him unsteady on his feet. He can feel the blood passing through his ears - *thump, thump, thump* - and see his chest moving up and down under two layers of clothing. Suddenly he's hot and sweaty and cold all at the same time. So *sweaty*. So *freezing*.

The scariest part is that even once he realizes it's a panic attack, he can't stop it. It's scary to be unable to stop it or calm it down or convince his body that he's not in any imminent danger.

His heart starts pounding so hard that it feels like he's going to have a heart attack. There's these vibrations he feels in his body, like he's jumping out of his own skin.

Mike's heart seems to pound even faster, even harder. He tries taking a deep breath to calm himself, but the breaths are sharp and shallow.

Lack of breath is felt throughout his body, along with that feeling of tiredness and lethargy. It's as if his lungs are working to deflect any much needed oxygen, having the same effect as drowning.

His vision gets darker and narrower and looks kaleidoscopic, like when you close your eyes and press down on your eyelids to see stars.

The physical symptoms are unlike anything else, a tightness in his chest so pronounced it actually feels like choking, dizziness like he's been hanging upside down for hours, tingling legs and numb hands.

It makes him cry uncontrollably and nothing he thinks or says to himself can make it stop. It has to run its course. It feels almost as if he's being held underwater with no way of coming up for air.

"You're dying," A voice in his head says. "This is what death feels like, and you're going to die alone."

It feels like the entire room is spinning.

The ringing in his ears won't stop.

(June 26th, 1988)

It's the last day of school, and he's still months away from his 18th birthday, and a year away from graduation.

Running away has always been Mike's plan. One night he would just pack a bag and leave. A final fuck you to his parents.

There's not much to pack. He has enough money saved up from working double shifts at Bradley's, and it should last him at least a couple weeks on his own. He has enough for the bus fare. It's just a matter of taking his fate into his own hands. Even if some things are already out of it.

He's too irrational, too impulsive, too careless with his own self for self preservation. But nonetheless there's something romantic and calming about disappearing into the night. It's a bit anticlimactic when his feet hit the sidewalk, and not a single obstacle stands in his way.

Not to say there isn't anything that could still go wrong. It all feels a bit like a show.

Like bugs, his thoughts are swarming, jittering, snaking their way through his brain. Hundreds of *will-they's* and *what-ifs* ; fears and doubts and worries. His head buzzes so much he almost doesn't notice the sound of the bus approaching until it pulls up with its lurching engines.

After a few seconds the bus doors open, but Mike is unmoving.

(September 7th, 1988)

"Please... stop." He puts his face in his hands.

-they're going to break you, tear you down and throw you out, destroy the

monster. They want someone better, someone in all ways not you. They are done, tired of you, you just aren't fucking worth it to anyone anymore-

“ *STOP!* Stop it. Fucking stop it,” he growls through gritted teeth, he takes a breath - a deep one - and then another. And the voices recede. With all the authority he can muster, he forces himself to stop shaking, for his lungs to open.

So... so yeah. Whatever this is, it will pass. Maybe Mike just needs some time to figure things out... time to *process* a couple things.

It's okay.

It will all be okay.

(October 20th, 1988)

Robin gave them ten minutes, it's been twenty, at least.

"Hey! I said ten minutes!" She yells from outside the door.

Dustin sighs, runs a hand through his mess of brown curls, leaning on the table in back of him. "Just- Mike. Tell your friends to stop messing with him. He doesn't need half the shit he gets and.." He trails off, unsure how to finish his sentence, shaking his head emphatically.

"Like I said before. I know." Mike's eyebrows are drawn together, ringing his fingers and looking down to the floor. "But they're not gonna listen to me so, it won't help much."

"Do you even like your friends now? You look miserable, man. Do you like how they act? How they - They're the same assholes that bullied us for years!" Dustin looks like he can't fathom even the thought. "How do you deal with that? Cause' I... I wouldn't be able to."

(October 23rd, 1988)

There's lots of things you can say when you talk about Mike Wheeler. He has horrible characteristics and even more flaws, but the fact remains: he never lies to himself , *never again* . But he's a pretty shitty person, there's no doubt about that.

"You turned into this huge egotistical dick."

Only seven words, in that voice Will has never used.

Mike didn't even argue it all too well. He couldn't, really. Is he an egotistical dick? *I should win an award for that.*

His brain slows down, his arms are hurting him so badly he can see black dots and stars dancing before his eyes when he opens them.

"Tell me, Mike, it's pretty simple, did you say it or did you not?"

He stands up, and it's a hard thing to accomplish. If he thinks everything through rationally for a moment it's nearly impossible for him to get from the bathroom into his room in the state he's in. He would crawl into his room, but he wouldn't call for help.

He looks in the cabinet in hopes of finding a painkiller. When Mike is convinced that there are none, and only god or some higher being can help him now, he steps out of the bathroom and into the hall.

He should be hurrying up, but he takes careful, cautious steps. Pain that doesn't want to end aches in his arms, his chest, his head.

Discursive, half-empty thoughts.

Fuck everything.

He wants to burn away till there's nothing left of him.

(October 31st, 1988)

"People get killed for being gay," Lucas says. "People are dying of AIDS. Fucking Reagan is president, Mike. Being gay now is like being black twenty years ago. People hate you, they want you dead."

Mike stays silent.

“Do you hate me because of my skin color?”

“No,” he mumbles. Mike's teeth dig into the flesh of his lower lip until the faint metallic tang of blood hits his tongue.

"You can't just say shit like that," Lucas shakes his head, "Let alone to one of your friends. I didn't think you were capable of being such an idiot." He scrubs a hand over his face, letting out an exasperated sigh. "And I know nothing I'm saying is even clicking in your head right now but try to *think* . He was right, you know, you're nothing like you used to be. I can see it now."

His head is a blank space void of emotions and coherent thoughts as he walks to the lunchroom, instead studies the scene, decides it's all a little too much, goes down the hall and into the bathroom. He stays there, in a stall, until the bell rings.

The rest of the day is a blur. Lucas's words echo in his brain.

This has got to be a nightmare. This whole thing. Even if it's all in his head, it's just as devastating.

Notes for the Chapter:

Some of the flashbacks take place after the summer events of Starcourt. Although there are no dates given, it's set somewhere between late July-

September.

Mike Wheeler's Mixtape

(All songs are pre- Summer of 1985. I made sure of that, so everything could be historically accurate.)

AHH. I know, and I feel the need to apologize. So... I'm sorry.

I think I need a beta. If ANYTHING is worded in a way that makes no sense, please let me know.

9. Withdrawl

Summary for the Chapter:

"He doesn't want anyone to see him like this. Even if they have looked him in the face on a bad day before, even if they know, even if they are intimately familiar with the way Will's face goes blank and lax and empty. As if the person wearing it has left, only for a little while."

or:

Will begins coming to terms with everything.

First it was *Utopia*. Then *Pursuit*.

Now he's onto the third stage: *Oblivion*.

It's easy to pretend that his eyes are blurred because he has *allergies*.

It's not easy to admit that there are tears stinging in his eyes—that his throat is tight with the need to cry, that his chest is burning and aching.

Jealousy isn't a word that he wants to say out loud, but Will knows it's exactly what he's feeling.

He hates it.

He hates that he can see the smile on Mike's face in his mind because he's memorized the way it makes his eyes crinkle; he only hates it because that smile now isn't for him.

He hates how much he wants it to be just for *him* .

He can't manage to reconcile the burning in his eyes and the sting of pain, the tightness in his chest and Mike's smile. There's not a world where all of those things should exist together; there's not a world where Mike smiling should make him this upset. No matter what he feels, he shouldn't be upset about this - he's acting like a complete ass to be angry now that Mike is happy, but the emotion is there crawling under his skin. Stinging, painful, and tight in his chest, wrapping around his heart and lungs until he can't breathe from how much he wants to scream.

His fingers twitch with the urge, but he takes a deep breath and pushes himself up from his bed instead. His knuckle ends up in his mouth and he bites hard enough that he can taste metallic copper for a moment in an attempt to make his mind stop racing and his heart stop hurting.

But even that isn't enough to quell the stupid sting in his eyes. The stupid feeling in his chest.

He doesn't know why he can't say it. He doesn't want to make *it* true.

Is it because he's waiting? Waiting until they're face to face—until he can make sure that the feelings ripping through him are just as strong

when Mike is right there in front of him, tangible and real.

Or maybe it's because he doesn't want to take the chance to ruin everything.

Maybe a small part of him hoped that Mike would say it first, break that barrier, so that he doesn't have to.

He'd been scared of his father, so he'd tried to run as far as he could.

All Will knows how to do is run and bolt from whatever he fears.

He's been running from Mike since he met him. This odd feeling. Will has done everything imaginable to push Mike out from under his skin, out of his heart, and it's never worked. Mike had always pushed back just as hard, weaving himself into Will's soul and taking up residence there like he belongs.

Will knew all this time, when he was letting Mike in, that he'd end up running away. Being in love with someone who burns as brightly as Mike does is a gift Will doesn't deserve. He hadn't earned that sunshine smile or that warm, all-encompassing love that Mike gave to him sometimes so freely. He didn't deserve those soft eyes looking at him like he was the most beautiful thing in the world. Mike is just so... so *good*. He's kind, soft, loving, open. But also expressive and excitable. He's everything that Will isn't, everything Will knew he would break.

And it's not fair, because Will wants to love him the right way. He wants to be the person that Mike deserves. But Will isn't wired for it. It isn't in his DNA.

No matter what Will wants, he can't have Mike. He can't be the one who breaks him.

Will crawls back into bed fully clothed and curls under the blankets to sleep next to his own misery. Still feeling Rebecca Miller's lips on his, that drop in his stomach all the way home from the Snowball. Jonathan having that lovesick smile on his face, his shaggy hair all out of place, ducking into their mom's car and avoiding her probing but lighthearted questions.

And what struck Will the most was - Mike has a *girlfriend* . He asked her, she said yes. Will watched as they kissed - the picture couldn't be more perfect, two kids being reunited at a school dance. Love at first sight.

Because honestly, it isn't like anything happened. Nothing is different. Nothing will change.

He will *never* allow himself to hope again.

But maybe... maybe things *should* change.

Blurring the edges of his sanity until the fire consumes him because at least he knows what it feels like to love, goddammit. Some people

go their whole lives without even so much as a spark. And here he is, lucky enough to have this forest fire raging inside him. Even if it's killing him. Would he trade this blaze for relief if he could?

The answer is a resounding *yes* .

-

Stage four: *Denial*.

Will watches as a golden hue soaks through the Wheelers' dining room, landing streams of sunshine that come freely at any time of year, bathing the inside of rooms in its radiant beams from wall to wall.

And Mike is sitting in it. Just, he isn't alone at the table. He's sitting next to his little sister, following along with her incoherent four year old rant.

But now Mike is watching him stare. He realizes he must look like a crazy person.

And in between holding his gaze, and losing it, Will disregards his raptured attention as he is used to doing with the brush of the back of their hands, with the unanticipated warmth from their skin coming in contact.

It's nothing personal against him, in the end, it's the fact that Will doesn't care doesn't *want* to watch Mike's "relationship" unfold when he was already dealing with wistful, unattainable, iridescently rose-colored visions of his own. Where Mike is a warmth kissed blaze, an intricately interwoven pattern, music to the aching soul, the ice drizzle of rain in the stifling heat of summer, but soothing all at once. And Will is glued to his walls, his mannerism, his gait, him walking with hands buried in his pockets and chin dipping low, fantasizing of being the one he's moving towards.

Will isn't stupid, despite where his train of thought might take him at least more than three times per day, he's well aware he holds more faults than Mike could think, or ever know.

Mike is different, the way he responds to the world is different than Will does.

Will realizes he's sitting down at the table, left unprotected, exposed.

Betraying his facade, betrayed by his imagination.

Unaware, he's springing to his feet at once, rushing out of his seat, rushing out of Mike's possible reach, outside the silhouetted weight of his lingering shadow, putting as much distance in between the two of them as he dares because he can't take it any longer.

And he wonders if Mike *knows* .

-

Stage five: *Acceptance*.

He stumbled into the shower afterwards, water so hot it burned his skin, and he stood beneath the rain spray until he couldn't breathe anymore.

His hair is dripping, wet strands prickling his forehead. And he puts on an old pair of sweats and a baggy, band t-shirt Jonathan lent him a few months ago.

He's staring blankly at no particular spot, numb, somewhat, losing cognizance of the passing time. For some unknown and foreign reason the thought of his mother refuses to leave him alone. Her missing presence is haunting, and very much tangible, and he can't think past the fact that he feels like he's lost yet again.

Mike's silent footsteps breach the discomfited hush, tearing him out of this torpor, stepping into his proximity, but a safe distance away.

As if they're separated by an unseen barricade.

And perhaps they are, perhaps they've been for a while now, and Will has been trying to bridge this gap all along, but in all the wrong ways.

This is what happens when good intentions are eaten up by space, bitten through by hesitation. Stealing depth and layers to issues left to float on the surface in fragments, this line of fire begins and ends with a match struck to the worst of intentions, lit by missing puzzle pieces and omitted truths, the vibrant lack of sincerity.

Mike lingers beside him, chewing back on words Will himself has fought for even conjuring.

In the end, he doesn't utter anything more substantial than, "Are you okay?"

Something stings. Will parts his dry, cracked lips a sliver, to reply, to lie, and the sting is gathering warm at the corners. He's suddenly blinking into a sharp realization. Finding out more than he bargained for. Finding softened stone there, at the center of his ribcage, into the beat of his heart, a rock orbit stuck inside of his lungs, biting through a bitten truth he is incapable of voicing:

I think I love you.

"...Nothing." He says, instead. Quiet. Suffocated.

Mike blinks at him, then nods his head a bit sheepishly, it's clear he's uncomfortable. "Dustin radioed while you were in the..." he falters. "We're going to Family Video. Everyone's gonna be there." A glance at the door. "You coming?"

He stifles the hurt, wondering if Mike truly knows. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

There’s a pause. “Hey, Will?”

“Yeah?”

“Happy birthday.”

-

The next few days are confusing—to say the least. Mike walks on eggshells around him, tentative greetings and minimal conversation. It's not like Will expected him to apologize but it's still a nasty shock when someone you've known for almost a decade tells you it isn't their *fault you don't like girls*.

Will needs more than avoidant behaviour from Mike, which has been unbearable to say the least. He doesn't want to be nervous every time he leaves his house, in fear of bumping into Mike with another awkward interaction.

He tried to ignore it, waiting for the right moment to strike up the conversation with Mike. He'd been putting it off, purely to prolong the inevitable rejection he'd receive. Some nights he'd imagine if

Mike would want him the same way, if he would ever consider dating him. He had to stifle those thoughts, they aren't doing him any favours in the effort to get over him.

-

11/19/88

When he wakes up, his mind is cluttered. Normally all Will wants to do in the morning is drag the covers over his head and push a little further into sleep until El has to drag him from bed. But today he's awake before both his mom and sister.

He lies in bed for a while, eyes darting around the ceiling, glazing over the scuffs in the old paint work.

His legs refuse to sit still for much longer and he finds himself dressed and in the kitchen by 6:10. The house is dead at this time, the usual creaks stalling in the chilly November morning air. Will sits at his usual seat at the table. And waits.

His mom is there first. She smiles through the sleep still etched on her face. She scrubs at her eyes with her palm and pulls open the fridge door.

"How did you sleep?" She has berry jam in one hand and a bag of bagels in the other.

Will shrugs. No answer.

They eat breakfast in silence, except for the occasional scrape of a knife. It's nice.

Nice to eat without it turning him inside out. Nice to eat without his mom gnawing at her bottom lip with worry.

She squeezes his hand when he leaves the table.

He'd like to say that the day seems normal enough.

Or, at least, his new version of normal, at least. It's just standard procedure by now.

Still, he tries to keep to his routines.

Fixes his bed, makes breakfast, brushes his teeth. Writes down a few things while leaving out much more. Dr. Owens used to tell him that writing might help lessen the pressure and he's not so stubborn as to forgo his wisdom just because he's bad at it.

It's only a few minutes before it all feels like a little too much.

Enough, whispers the only soft voice in his head.

One breath in, one breath out. That's how it goes, right? One breath in and one breath out and then he repeats it until he can't anymore.

Will doesn't know why his lungs feel like they don't need any oxygen.

The snuffle he lets out resonates in the living room, loud and cold and Will thinks, when the numbness leaves, he might cry.

In his mind he focuses hard on thinking about something positive.

Vanilla ice cream. The sound charcoals make on paper. Falling asleep on the couch, leaning his head in the crook of his mother's shoulder. The TV making soft white noise.

It doesn't help.

Not in the *slightest* .

He's pacing around unable to sit still for even a moment. Somehow he managed to stay calm enough for El or his mother to sense

normalcy so they left him alone. El is picking up a shift at the diner and his mother decided to go to the flea market near Beverly. And that means he has the house to himself.

He's caught between ending this, snapping back into reality, before chastising the urge.

He walks into the kitchen and turns on a burner. Turns it off.

Repeat.

He does that three more times.

When he feels like he's out of place, his heart is made of stone, partially, and his face is unmoving, *numb, numb, numb* . It feels like a violation. Of what - he doesn't know.

Will suddenly realizes that he's shaking - his breath is quick. He tries to quiet the thump of panic hammering against his heart.

"Stop it," he mutters, jerking his head to silence the oppressive voices in his head and scrubbing a hand down his face.

There's not really anything that could pull him out of this place right now. There's not really anything that could make him start caring.

He feels heavy, but not settled into himself. As if everything else is heavy and that's why he's heavy too - but not really.

He doesn't want anyone to see him like this. Even if they have looked him in the face on a bad day before, even if they know, even if they are intimately familiar with the way Will's face goes blank and lax and empty. As if the person wearing it has left, only for a little while.

There should be a feeling about this somewhere inside of him. It can't let the warmth that seeps into his skin, into his hands and into his bones, can't let that go deeper, can't let it touch him where there's what feels like an open wound.

Maybe that's what it is. An open wound. Open and bleeding and ripped and clawed at, to the point where it doesn't hurt because there's nothing left that can still be hurting. Maybe that's what he is, ripped and clawed at, hollow. All the fleshy human parts missing.

Will wonders if that is what he sees when he looks at his reflection in the mirror. If it makes him feel hollow and empty as if there's something missing, too.

He hopes that at some point his brain will simply give up and quiet, but it looks like it's the type of bad day that ends with insomnia.

He wonders if Mike ever feels like this.

He hopes not. He knows this with unwavering certainty - despite

everything. He hopes Mike *never* feels like this.

(He read the book that Mike gave him. In just a few sleepless nights, he had reached the end.

One sentence stood out to him.

"The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together."

It was highlighted.)

There's a thunderstorm brewing underneath the layers of white clouds. And Will might finally rip through the sheets and let the tsunami of feelings wash over him. He'll be an open wound, *bleeding, bleeding, bleeding*, red all over.

Will breathes in, crumples together, his mouth an ugly grimace and his eyes shut tightly. He's not sobbing. He'd have to feel sad to sob, he'd have to feel anything at all. Maybe unraveling will only make him feel more numb. It'll leave him emptier, margins of the wound gaping.

Every single night, he tells himself that it can't get any worse than this, that it isn't humanly possible to miss someone any more than he does already, to be any more desperate for someone's touch.

And every night that follows he finds out he's wrong.

He can't breathe. It doesn't feel like he needs to. It feels as if, should he hold his breath, time would do the same and pause together with him.

It feels like falling. It feels like the ground is being ripped away.

He wonders if people can see the gaping wound. He wonders if the friends he's had for years can see.

In the end, falling to pieces doesn't look like a hurricane or a thunderstorm or a tsunami. In the end there's no violent sobs that wrack his body until he can't breathe anymore.

In the end everything feels quiet.

But nothing quite reflects numbness like denial. Especially when the ghosts of memories haunt more than usual. It's agony inside his own head.

He remembers when hope was some sort of beacon - a light calling to him amidst a heavy darkness.

Will knows he should've said something, should've made some kind of effort, but he's got his own bad mood barreling down on him like thunderclouds; huge, sudden, and always unexpected despite it's constancy.

He nearly trips over his own feet getting to his room.

Call me, rings in his head.

He doesn't.

“Will.” His sister's sweet voice says a few hours into the evening, it's the kind of soft it only gets when she's trying to take care of someone. “Are you not feeling well?”

Will feels sick with guilt the whole time. Every time he sees El, or his mother's kind face he wants to jump off the face of the earth so they don't have to deal with his stupid brain.

And he knows he's supposed to work on that; *letting people help him*.

The mattress dips a little below his waist, and he feels a hand settle against his side, trying to comfort him.

He forces down the covers with quivering hands, peeking out at El. Her hair out loose, thrown over her oversized graphic t-shirt, Madonna adorned on the front.

“Hey, *buddy* .” A word she uses that he knows she must have picked up from Jonathan talking to him. Her hand moves in a gentle

stroking motion against his side. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Will’s eyes burn and his nose itches as the tears break loose. He folds his knees to his chest, and each breath rattles distressingly. He’s buried under three thick winter blankets but still achingly cold. His skin feels as if it’s throbbing painfully with waves of iciness that keep crashing over him. Everything hurts and he wants to stay bundled up forever, in a ball, nothing more than a human lump in his bed until he fades away and doesn’t have to feel like this anymore.

If he can’t understand it himself, how is he supposed to form a coherent sentence? Articulating the way that the very idea of moving makes him want to sleep forever? The thought of interacting with people makes him feel shaky and sick? The concept of having to *exist* in the world and be an actual person makes him want to disappear forever? His head feels wrong and his thoughts aren’t coming out right. It’s all a jumbled mess too tangled up to even begin to sort through.

“W-Why are you here?”

Will’s throat feels scraped raw, and he looks away from her. He bundles up the blankets around his now exposed arms, feeling another wave of cold seeping in.

He feels her adjust the blankets, wrapping him tighter in them, like she knows, and feels the chills running up his skin.

“Wanna take a bath?” El says after a long bout of silence. “It might help.”

Will waits by the sink shivering, while El fills up the bathtub, submerging her hand under the tap to check if the temperature is warm enough.

He assumes their quarrel is forgotten. Pushed past them.

He hopes so for the better.

When she finally deems the bath full enough, she gets up, wiping her wet hands on her pants. "Do you need me to stay?"

"No, it's fine."

She looks unconvinced. "You sure?"

The water is hot, almost painfully so as Will slips in, letting out a sigh. The cold is still there, a low pulsating sensation under the scalding temperature that's slowly warming him up. His knees peek out from the water, pink, and wobbly.

El stayed, she's sitting on the toilet, legs crossed, while the shower curtain is drawn. "Is it helping?"

Will slides further into the water until it's covering his shoulders. "Yeah, a little." He responds.

Afterwards, El straightens out the sheets on his bed while he gets dressed. She settles down next to him and he can breath a little better.

He remembers he isn't alone as he drifts off.

At some point, Will realizes he's awake. It's a gentle awakening. No grating beeps to interrupt something bizarrely pleasant, no terrible monster to launch him back into reality. Just a sudden realization that he's no longer sleeping for no good reason.

Static buzzes faintly from somewhere in front of him. He's warm, and comfy, and wrapped in a blanket, thick and soft. Something's pressing against him to his left, pinning his left arm to his side. It doesn't make sense to panic, but the sensation reminds Will of being restrained, of being helpless, alone, weak, useless, and it brings about a big enough pit in his stomach that he opens his eyes.

The thing to Will's left pinning his arm is Eleven. She's sleeping soundly, leaning bodily against Will, lips parted like she's a snorer, but she's not.

The door squeaks open, revealing Joyce in her work clothes, when looking at Will and then the sleeping El beside him, she mouths a 'sorry' and closes the door.

With his lips curled into a small smile, he lays his head back on the pillow underneath him, closing his eyes, wrapped up in a cocoon of warm blankets, of family and love, of bonds that have been tested by fire and emerged on the other side stronger, tighter, unbreakable. A cocoon to chase all the monsters and nightmares away.

Care is sometimes misunderstood as pestering.

Love is sometimes misunderstood as pestering.

Not moving on is sometimes misunderstood as weakness.

Not letting go is sometimes misunderstood as stubbornness.

Learn to live with that pain. It will get better with time. Will knows this now.

It's liberating and devastating—yet remains separate—a paradox.

Withdrawal.

Will can only describe it as withdrawal. This creeping itch dragging beneath his skin, scraping through his veins; a restlessness pricking at his joints and buzzing in his ears, making his palms itch and teeth grind. And he's pretty sure his organs aren't supposed to hurt.

Stage six: *Moving on*.

Notes for the Chapter:

I would love to hear what you think, all comments are appreciated and welcomed!!